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ACTUARIES AND OTHER STORIES

Todd Dodson

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By

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ABSTRACT

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The collection of short fiction contained herein vary in both stylistic form and thematic content. In a sense, the work is akin to an artist's sketchbook. In terms of form, the stories range from metafiction to magical realism to minimalism. As for content, the stories explore the intersections of history, memory, myth and narrative. They are all love stories of sorts.

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This thesis follows the format prescribed by the *MLA Manual of Style* and the Department of English.

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INTRODUCTION

The work contained in my MFA thesis represents my studies in literary form and technique. I present it as an artist's sketchbook. In part, each story began as a specific project in my endeavor to learn the craft of narrative writing. For example, I wanted to write a story driven by the narrative voice in the eponymous story, "Actuaries," whereas "Letterman" began as an exercise in plot. In terms of content, I am interested in the domains of history, memory, and narration, and how each implicates the other. As well, I am interested in where meaning is located, and how it is located, in each domain. I like to think many of the stories in *Actuaries* are also love stories. It is my purpose here to outline my goals and literary influences with regard to the collected stories. What follows are five glosses for works contained in the thesis, and one longer analysis of Raymond Carver's writing style, which was the foundation for, "Listen to Him."

The story "Actuaries" began as an exercise in voice and became a fictional shaping of nonfictional material. In my mind, voice is essential to any first person narrative, especially one written by a thirty-year-old, educated, white male. This is to say, as a reader I am not so interested in my own story as I would tell it. In the writing, my literary influences voice driven stories such as Gish Jen's "Who's Irish" and Eudora Welty's "Why I live at the P.O." Specifically I admired the narrative energy achieved through syntax and diction. For example, consider how Welty establishes her "I" in the story's first paragraph:

> I was getting along fine with Mama, Papa-Daddy and Uncle Rondo until my sister Stella-Rondo just separated from her husband and came back home again. Mr. Whitaker! Of course I went with Mr. Whitaker first, when he first appeared here in China Grove, taking 'Pose Yourself' photos and Stella Rondo broke us up. Told him I was one-sided. Bigger on one side than the other, which is a deliberate, calculated falsehood: I'm the same. (375)

Consider the repetition (and the rhythms it provides the prose) of "Rondo", "Mr. Whitaker" and "first". Consider the contrast in diction between "broke us up" and "calculated falsehood" and what it reveals about the narrator. And consider the very choice of how she refers to her father as "Papa-Daddy", and an old boyfriend/ her brother-in-law as "Mr. Whitaker." To me, these are the techniques that bring a first-person narrative to vivid life, and what I tried to employ in "Actuaries." The second formal exercise in the story involved plot, the sequencing of events. In the story, there are two settings, two times and two places, one static and the other kinetic, a narrator reflecting on what had occurred in the past. The ordering of events proceeds in reverse order, from the end, in which a lover killers herself, to the beginning, when they first met. This ordering was an attempt to have the form of the story imitate its content: a narrator tracing how things had gone wrong back to the source. Originally, the story was written in an impossible tangle of past and present verb tenses, in my conscious effort to show how the one impinges upon the other, how the past yet hangs in the present. In terms of readability, in terms of clarity, this was unsuccessful. The version that appears here, with regard to verb tense, is a simple book- end framing; the story opens in the present, moves to a sequence of flashbacks, and then returns to the present at the close.

"181 Days" is a first person account about teaching middle school in the inner city of Philadelphia. It is a personal account, the closest I come to writing nonfiction, perhaps a response to the old maxim of writing about what you know. The writing began with a series of anecdotes recorded on note cards and scraps of paper throughout my four years at Beeber Middle School in Philadelphia. The challenge was how to organize these events and a rather large cast of characters into a coherent narrative shape contained in a dozen or so pages. The vignette struck me as the answer, exemplified in novel form by Sandra Cineros' The House on Mango Street and in short story form by Susan Minot's "Lust." In my mind, the vignette structure provides a different narrative movement. Traditional, linear plot operates as a chain of causally related events; by contrast, a story told in vignettes operates through juxtaposition, through layering, which creates a gestalt effect. In my mind, "181 Days" was my first successful story, published in The American Review.

"This Is Not Fiction" employs multiple narration and footnotes, and may be classified as metaficion, perhaps meta-nonfiction. Admittedly, the footnote structure is nothing new. David Foster Wallace in his Infinite Jest and Lee Siegel's Love in a Dead Language, do it much better than I. Although the form, I hope, does suit the content. On one hand, this structuring calls attention to the difference between fiction and nonfiction, the formal conventions as well as how the two simply look different on the page. On the other hand, the dual narration calls attention to what happened, what one remembered happening, and what one tells others had happened. In terms of voice, ideally a distinction can be heard in

the two narrations, again in an effort to have the form mirror the content. The primary text tries to authentically reproduce the experience, with the footnotes scrutinizing it from a remove—yet, counter-intuitively, I believe that very act of scrutiny also lends an authority to it. In part, the story was a response to the James Frey scandal that was just breaking at the time. I was immediately interested in how people read fiction and nonfiction differently, how their assumptions about whether it is true or not affects their engagement and response to the text. In a way, the writing of "This Is Not Fiction" is an attempt to answer the question vis-à-vis A Million Little Pieces*,* Does it really matter? The story appeared in the 2006 Spring issue of Ninth Letter.

There were two projects that drove the writing of "Tenement": I wanted to tell a story written in what I'm calling the first-person plural; I wanted to return to the Aristotelian plot arc. With regard to the first point, the story, told from a peripheral narrator in the form of a "we", is derivative of William Faulkner's short story, "A Rose for Emily." In the past I have struggled with writing in the third person; the narration persistently read as overly formal, academic, cold. Writing a story told by a character-observer was my attempt to get closer to the third person point of view. As well, I admire voice in a piece of writing, and I believed I could hear the character who wanted to tell this story. In terms of plot, I am largely indebted to the wisdom that Janet Burroway embodies in her manual, Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft. She describes plot as a "pattern of connection and disconnection between characters." The movement of the story is comes through "characters mak[ing] and break[ing] emotional bonds of trust,

love, understanding, or compassion with one another" (38). Much of the preliminary writing of "Tenement" was laying out this pattern that I wished to drive the story.

The plot of "The Pennsylvanian" is derivative of the Atalanta myth, in which a young maiden refuses to be wed until one her suitors can best her in a footrace. Although, the story is more than a modern retelling, as there are elements of the western and magical realism in the writing as well. The story is set at the turn of the previous century, and part of the challenge was including convincing detail that reflected the time and place. As well, the story is written in the first person, a peripheral narrator that emerges at the climax. Part of the challenge then entailed voice. I tried to accomplish this through diction and syntax, as opposed to phonetic spelling. My model was Gish Jen's "Who's Irish?" that is a first person account told by a Chinese immigrant. The story begins: "In China, people say mixed children are supposed to be smart, and definitely my granddaughter Sophie is smart. But Sophie is wild, Sophie is not like my daughter Natalie, or like me. I am work hard my whole life, and fierce besides" (310). Note that there are no unconventional spellings; rather, the voice is created through the nonstandard grammar. Finally, I wanted to write a story with a happy ending, one that ends exactly where it was headed all along.

Perhaps no other contemporary writer has inspired as many imitators, myself included, as Raymond Carver. While imitation is largely used with pejorative connotations in our culture, there is something redeeming about the practice. Nicholas Delbanco, in his aptly named manual for the craft of writing,

The Sincerest Form, states, “We’ve grown so committed as a culture to the ideal of originality that the writer who admits to working in the mode and manner of another writer will likely stand accused of being second-rate. But to imitate is not to be derivative; it’s simply to admit that we derive from what was accomplished by others” (xxiii). In Delbanco’s classroom, analysis necessarily precedes synthesis. Before writing, he first teaches his students to read. With regard to Carver, there is something infectious about his prose style that inspires so many young writers, but what is his unmistakable signature? What exactly is style, and how is it accomplished? We can put a label on his work, as critics have, and call the style minimalist, and while that summation may be useful to an extent, in the end it is only one word. Minimal how? At first, a writer’s style seems ineffable—we have an intuition that a given piece of writing belongs to the hand of Joyce or Woolf—but the question can be answered more empirically. To begin with, we must understand style as form. That is, a use of language in a particular way with regard to form. As such, to articulate a writer’s form we must look to the techniques that generate it. Point of view and narrative distance, diction and syntax, plot and structure. These are the tools of the trade, and by examining how they are employed can we understand how a story is built. I wrote “Listen to Him” as an intentional stylistic imitation of Carver. To accomplish this goal, I had closely analyzed his short story, “A Small, Good Thing,” which analysis I offer here.

Arguably, point of view—“Where the language is coming from” as David Jauss would say—is the single most defining element of narrative writing.

Delbanco, as many others, labels the point of view in "A Small, Good Thing" as objective, or dramatic, which he defines as such: "A point of view that functions as a kind of roving camera; the narrator can report on everything seen or heard in a scene, but cannot report what goes on in any character's mind" (G-4). Delbanco is in part, correct with his conclusion. Consider the story's opening:

> Saturday afternoon she drove to the bakery in the shopping center. After looking through a loose-leaf binder with photographs of cakes taped onto the pages, she ordered chocolate, the child's favorite. The cake she chose was decorated with a space ship and launching pad under a sprinkling of white stars, and a planet made of red frosting at the other end. His name, SCOTTY, would be in green letters beneath the planet. The baker, who was an older man with a thick neck, listened without saying anything when she told him the child would be eight years old next Monday. The baker wore a white apron that looked like a smock. Straps cut under his arms, went around in back and then to the front again, where they were secured under his heavy waist. He wiped his hands on his apron as he listened to her. He kept his eyes down on the photographs and let her talk. He let her take her time. He'd just come to work and he'd be there all night, baking, and he was in no real hurry. (235)

On the surface, the point of view does in fact appear to be objective. Carver shows action and provides description of what can be seen, along with indirect or summarized dialogue. Yet the point of view is more nuanced. First, the reader is privy to Mrs. Weiss consciousness: "It was the child's favorite." Through the first four sentences in fact, the reader is following her. Although a subtle shift to the baker consciousness occurs in the fifth sentence. From this point the reader is with the baker, and again has access to his interior thoughts as evinced by, "He was in no real hurry." The story's second paragraph again shifts back to Mrs. Weiss and again we have inside access: "There must be something between them, she thought" (235). With regard to these shifts of interior perspectives then, the point of view is omniscient. As a reader, we are as David Jauss would have it, both

"Inside and Out." While the reader is Out through most of the story, the point of view shifts In at critical junctures. As well, the omniscience extends beyond the baker and Mrs. Weiss. At key moments we have access to the consciousness of Mr. Weiss (on his drive home) and even the driver that hit Scotty: "The boy wobbled a little. He looked dazed, but okay" (236). As such, a more nuanced way of considering point of view in "A Small, Good Thing" is in terms of aspect. There is a dominant, objective aspect. There is an interior omniscient aspect. There is, as well, a limiting aspect.

It is revealing to consider how the point of view is limited in particular ways, employed for dramatic effect. For example, the hospital scenes are intentionally limited to the Weisses' perspective. Carver's aim here is to simulate for the reader the experience and anguish in having one's child in the emergency room. The effect is accomplished in a subtle manner, but consider how the passage of time is conveyed. How long is Scotty in the hospital? Two days? Five days? What time of day is it when a particular scene takes place? Carver intentionally leaves out explicit time references and instead has the reader mark the passage of time as the Weisses do: "The door opened and Dr. Francis came in. He was wearing a different suit and tie this time. His grey hair was combed along the sides of his head, and he looked as if he had just shaved" (241). It is the next morning; the Weisses have been up all night. As well, the scene with the negro family is limited in a critical way. First, the reader and the camera follows Mrs. Weiss out the door. She is going home to get some rest, to take a bath. She passes the nurses' station. She makes a wrong turn and finds herself in the waiting room

where she finds Evelyn. For this scene to work, the reader must stay close to Mrs. Weiss, as the scene explodes with, "'Franklin,' the large woman said as she roused herself. 'Is it about Franklin?'" (243). We see the negro family through Anne's eyes: "She wanted to talk more with these people who was in the same kind of waiting she was in. She was afraid, and they were afraid." Notice how the words "these people" positions the reader with Mrs. Weiss and creates distance from Evelyn. As well, it should be apparent that the last phrase "they were afraid" is being filtered and determined by Anne.

The most obvious places where the point of view is intentionally limited are with the baker's phone calls. The technique is employed for dramatic irony. Here, the reader knows more than the characters: "'There's a cake that wasn't picked up,' the voice on the other end of the line said" (244). Obvious to the reader, the "voice" is the baker. The reader again follows the Weisses in a limited fashion when they finally figure it out and go to confront the baker: "They drove down to the shopping center… They parked in front of the bakery… The bakery windows were dark, but when they looked through the glass they could see a light in the back room and, now and then, a big man in an apron moving in and out of the white, even light" (250). Here we see the baker from the Weiss' limited point of view, and then we get the line of direct interior monologue: "She could hear a radio faintly playing inside and something creak—an oven door as it was pulled down?" Again Carver is manipulating the point of view for dramatic effect. In a story about disconnection and ultimately, communion, the form mirrors the content. It is fitting then that in the closing scene predicated on reconciliation, we

return to the Baker's consciousness: "He put butter on the table and knives to spread the butter. Then the baker sat down with them. He waited. He waited until they each took a roll from the platter and began to eat" (251).

A discussion of point of view is inextricable from a discussion of distance. There are two ways we might think of narrative distance. First, we may consider what John Gardner refers to as psychic distance: "the distance the reader feels between himself and the events of a story" (111). In this understanding, Carver keeps the camera largely pulled back, using long or medium shots, which is customary for the objective point of view. For example, consider the moment when Scotty is hit by the car: "On Monday morning, the birthday boy was walking to school with another boy. They were passing a bag of potato chips back and forth and the birthday boy was trying to find out what his friend intended to give him for his birthday that afternoon. Without looking, the birthday boy stepped off the curb at an intersection and was immediately knocked down" (236). In this passage, the reader is at a far remove from the event. Consider the language that creates this distance: the names are indefinite, we have "the birthday boy", not Scotty, and his "friend"; the dialogue is indirect, meaning that the characters are talking yet the reader can't hear exactly what they are saying; finally, the boy was "knocked down" as opposed to "hit", as opposed to "suddenly hit" or "tragically hit". The action is described in distant, unemotional language. Of course what follows, as mentioned above, is that the camera zooms in not on the boy, but the driver, and here we get the close up: "He looked dazed, but okay." In relation to point of view, Carver manipulates distance in a similar

fashion. We can say, for the most part, that the narrative is objective and the psychic distance great; although, there are specific, brief points in which the point of view is internally omniscient and the psychic distance close. The effect of this technique, apart from characterizing Carver's style, is to maximize—through contrast—the emotional response from the reader and to guard against sentimentalizing. That is, we are affected by the sudden closeness due to our exposure of being kept so far away. The driver becomes all the more horrifying precisely because we get so suddenly close to him.

A more developed way of understanding distance is in regard to what Wanye Booth calls aesthetic distance. In his seminal essay, "Distance and Point of View," Booth states that the writer and critic will benefit by examining not just the distance between reader and plot, but also the distances between implied author, narrator and character. With regard to "A Small, Good Thing," the distance between narrator and character is of particular importance. For example, it is essential for the story to ultimately work that the reader be distant from the baker at the story's beginning and middle and close to him at the story's end. Carver accomplishes this movement in two ways. First, he posits the reader close to the Weisses by having the camera primarily follow their movements (the limited aspect of point of view). Second, and at the same time, the narrator keeps his distance from the characters by reporting only events, only what the characters see and say (the objective aspect of point of view). The narrator does not evaluate the actions of any of the characters. None are favored. Again, the story doesn't read: "Scotty was tragically hit by a car." The consequence is that the reader is

attached to the Weisses, and as they move closer to the baker so too does the reader, hence allowing for the communion and the story's resolution.

Certainly, we can impose a list adjectives to describe the syntax and diction of Carver's writing. We can say that the former is measured, that the latter is mundane. Yet more important than simply describing, is understanding how Carver's word choice and sentence structure function in terms of stylistic effect. Consider the following passage:

> She pulled into the driveway and cut the engine. She closed her eyes and leaned her head against the wheel for a minute. She listened to the ticking sounds the engine made as it began to cool. Then she got out of the car. She could hear the dog barking inside the house. She went to the front door, which was unlocked. She went inside and turned on lights and put on a kettle of water for tea. She opened some dogfood and fed Slug on the back porch. The dog ate in hungry little smacks. It kept running into the kitchen to see that she was going to stay. As she sat down on the sofa with her tea, the telephone rang. (244)

What can we say about the syntax and diction of this passage? The paragraph contains eleven sentences and 124 words. That's an average of eleven words per sentence. They are relatively short. All eleven sentences are written in the active voice, and granted we are taught to favor the active voice in writing, yet ten of the eleven sentences begin with the subject of the sentence, seven of them with the pronoun, "She". In fact, the only sentence to begin with an introductory clause—done to create suspense through suspending the telephone's ring until the very last—is: "As she sat down". These sentences are direct, and the movement from one sentence to the next is plodding. Of the 124 words there are two participles functioning as adjectives, ticking and unlocked, and four descriptive adjectives: hungry, little, front and back. There are no adverbs in the paragraph. There is no

figurative language; things are not like something else, rather, they are what they are. We can say that the prose is skeletal or bland. When the action verbs of the passage are culled we have the following: cut, closed, leaned, listened, got, hear, went, turned, put, opened, fed, ate, running, sat, rang. In terms of etymology, all of these words are of Germanic (Anglo-Saxon) origins; none are Latinate or of French origins. These characters do not masticate, activate, or designate, nor do they retrieve or relieve. The action of the scene is plain. The nouns are similarly common. Of the 124 words, twenty-two have two syllables and there is only a single word that has three syllables or more: telephone. The words are easily digested. One doesn't require a dictionary. In the eleven sentences there are only two internal punctuation marks; there are only two commas. There are only four sentences with dependent clauses; the rest are comprised of a single independent clause (four of them with compound predicates). The sentences are untangled, straightforward.

As a result, the syntax and diction make the passage easy and quick to read, yet at the same time, the repetitious subject-verb-object sentence structure and little words slow the reader down: She pulled, she closed, she listened. The effect is that the sentence structure mirrors Mrs. Weiss' internal, mental state, and simulates those feelings for the reader. We plod. We go through the motions. The bland vocabulary refrained of emotion reflects the state of the Weisses' paralyzed sense of impending loss. More importantly, in terms of dramatic effect, and Carver is a dramatist, the paragraph sets up the next line when the scene explodes with Mrs. Weiss answering the phone, which we suspect and fear is the baker:

“‘Yes!’ she said as she answered. ‘Hello!’” Finally, this passage is indicative of Carver’s writing technique at large and which generates his prose style. The syntax and diction of Carver’s writing ultimately reflect his characters, the world they live in, and the themes of their stories. Carver’s “particular world” is that of the everyday, his language is that of the vernacular.

The plot arc and story structure of “A Small, Good Thing” is simple, in that the story is told chronologically and in a linear fashion. There are no flashbacks nor flash-forwards; there are no alternate or multiple narrators. The plot follows Freitag’s triangle: we have an inciting event followed by a series of complications that ascend without detour to a climax and taper to a resolution. Yet the elegance of the story is that there are two triangles of plot, a larger one superimposing a smaller one. This is to say, consider the story without the baker. In such case, the story now opens with Scotty being knocked down by the car. The rising action entails the sequence of scenes at the hospital, the encounters with doctors and nurses and the “negro” family. Tension builds until the climax: Scotty dies. Indeed there is a clear narrative arc here, yet without the baker the story would be one dimensional and could do no more than simulate loss for the reader. The presence of the baker imposes upon the plot. His phone calls heighten the tension throughout the rising action. Scotty’s death is still climatic, although it is now part of a larger plot, now subsumed by a new conflict, and now overshadowed by a bigger climax, which is precisely when the Weisses figure it out: It’s the baker! Thus, the resolution is now more satisfying to the reader, as

the meaning of the story has been altered by the actions of the baker. More than just loss, we have a human communion in the face of loss.

Nearly the entire story takes place in scene. Almost all of the action is dramatized on stage, as opposed to being summarized or recounted in narration. The narrator provides but a glimpse of the back-story, the story before Anne Weiss went one day to order a cake for her son's birthday. The one piece of back-story the reader does get occurs when Mr. Weiss first drives home from the hospital: "Until now, his life had gone smoothly and to his satisfaction—college, marriage, another year of college for his advanced degree… He was happy and so far lucky—he knew that" (237). While this passage is not technically interior monologue, it almost asks to be read as such, as: this is what Mr. Weiss is thinking on the ride home. Again, the rest of the story's narration is limited to describing what characters do and say. The action is live and unfiltered by the narrator. The narrator intentionally stays out of the way and because of this, the reader cannot escape the story. The reader becomes a captive of the emotional tension; the camera does not pull out in an instance for the narrator to pause and reflect (thus preventing the reader to pause and reflect) on the action. There is no respite for the reader to the events taking place.

This narrative technique plays counterpoint to Carver's use of dialogue, the extensive use of which is the natural result of telling a story almost entirely in-scene with a narrator trying to stay out of the way. On one hand, Carver's dialogue can certainly be admired for its idiomatic realism. Characters are made distinct by the way that they speak. Consider the various nurses in the story, none

of whom have a name, that the reader is able to distinguish simply by their spoken language: "'She could do that,' the nurse said. 'I think you should both feel free to do that, if you wish'" (238); "'What's wrong with him anyway?' She said. 'He's a sweetie'" (241). Although on the other hand, it is more important to note and understand how Carver uses dialogue in opposition to the narration. Precisely, the restrained narration allows for highly emotional dialogue, which would otherwise devolve into melodrama. Through his sedate narration, Carver is able to get away with fourteen exclamation points (averaging one per page throughout the story) in his dialogue. Instead of the dialogue reading as over-sentimental, the opposite is true. Take into account the measured control of Carver's prose and then consider the following scene:

> Ann hung up the telephone after talking to her sister. She was looking up another number when the telephone rang. She picked it up on the first ring.
>
> "Hello," she said, and she heard someone in the background, a humming noise. "Hello!" she said. "For God's sake," she said. "Who is this? What is it you want?"
>
> "Your Scotty, I got him ready for you," the man's voice said. "Did you forget him?"
>
> "You evil bastard!" she shouted into the receiver. "How can you do this, you evil son of a bitch?"
>
> "Scotty," the man said. "Have you forgotten about Scotty?" The man hung up on her. (248)

Note the restraint on the narration, the underlying calm in the phrasing, "the man's voice said" and, "The man hung up on her." By keeping his narrator objective and at a distance, Carver thus creates episodes of genuinely moving drama.

What is style? Style is form. It is the necessary result of the writer's technique. Style is the consequence of the point of view and distance in the narration. It is a function of the narrator's word choice and sentence structure. It is the result of how the writer elects to order and express the events of his story. If one wanted to write like Carver, he would do well do consider and employ the following techniques: If writing in the third person, keep the point of view primarily objective; use this distance in narration as counterpoint to dialogue; tell it straight—allow clean image and gesture to carry the story. Finally, it is worth noting that a signature is taken to be something unique to the individual, and perhaps Carver's style is so definitive that it precludes any future literary effort in that style. Yet like Delbanco, I believe close analysis necessarily precedes effective synthesis. In my years at Northern Michigan, I have endeavored to learn from history's master writers with the aim of improving my craft and one day discovering my own style.

I am always surprised at the attendance and wonder how it is that no one's ever sick on that first day of school. Against the odds all of the teachers sign in, ready for business. One way or the other all parents or guardians get sons, daughters, and wards of the state through the doors. Perhaps sickness is a function inversely proportional to hope. On that first day students yet to have grades with which to be labeled, the teachers yet to have behavior problems to manage. Who knows, perhaps anything can happen.

I make a point of sizing up the male students, some of whom I know are going on sixteen at the start of eighth grade, and am relieved when I feel that there is none that I couldn't take in a fair fight. Because one boy calls another boy a fag, and that's it, it's on. They're out in the hall, the one boy actually taking a moment to tear off his own T-shirt. But I do enjoy the fights. And I've always found that getting involved is good for establishing a rep. Plus, it breaks up the day a little. These are the times I thank being born a man. Had I been born a woman I would only hope to have been brought up like our coordinator, who will step into the mix as quick as any.

It is Monday and the science teacher has called out sick.

We have a uniform policy this year, and the teachers find themselves constantly critiquing their students' dress. To tuck in a shirt or put a belt around that prison-

dip. To take off the hoody or remove the jeans showing underneath at the cuffs of dress pants. Fashion cuts that are either too low or too high, depending on the offensive body part in question. Referring a student to the appropriate section in the handbook that clearly states that you may wear khaki bottoms or a khaki top, but not khaki bottoms and a khaki top, that is, at the same time, this comprising a wholly different uniform, which the student obviously already knows. I asked our coordinator about this Dickie on Dickie, khaki on khaki, that everyone's wearing and she tells me it's from the street, so even when the cops get a description it's of little use because they're all, "a young, black male in khaki Dickies."

Dan is a new teacher who one day puts out a student. In parting, the student throws the door back in his face. Dan is a quick cat. He gets his arm up to stop the slam only to put it right through that little rectangle of glass. Dan needs twenty-six stitches, though has decided not to press charges.

Mrs. Munroe, the poor woman, teaches Home Economics. She has taught here for twenty-seven years and still has not learned: never turn your back. When she serves the subsidized breakfast to her first period class, they wait until she turns her back to throw the oranges. Mrs. Munroe has decided to press charges.

I have friends who teach at other schools. One tells me that his students call all their teachers simply Mister or Miss, according to gender. That is, "Hey Mister,

what time we leave here?" or "Yo Miss, what time is it?" I think this is telling and am happy to be teaching at my school where I still have a name.

The science teacher has not shown up today. Carrying their chairs before them, one third of her class comes straggling down the hall like refugees towards me. I know before the first one even has to say it: "We've been split up." There will be over forty bodies in my room, and but for lunch they will have to deal with me and these four walls all day. When I run out of instruction, I will close the door and windows, turn up the radiator, turn off the lights, and show a movie. And hope that I have something that they have not yet seen.

Some of us have taken to drink before Back to School night.

Karif is sitting in the coordinator's office and sticks to his story, saying that he found it on the street coming to school. The coordinator holds up the soiled athletic sock for his closer inspection. She asks, "You saw *this* on the side of the road and decided to *pick it up?*" Of course, the sock is packed with about two ounces of weed. They take Karif out in cuffs.

The math teacher has gone and sprained her ankle, and the coordinator is not as pleased that we have a substitute for her absence. The classrooms here come in pairs; solid wooden dividers that run floor to ceiling make two out of one. And by the substitute's third day they have been torn down, exposing the adjacent science

lab. The coordinator shows me the debris at lunchtime. They could not have a done a more efficient job had they tools from the shop. Perhaps they did. When I ask what happened, she tells me no one knows, no one saw a thing.

Scooby. Scooby is a troubled girl and when she comes into my room and puts her head down, I think to let a sleeping dog lie. Later, the coordinator pulls her out with security in tow. Apparently, Scooby just set fire to the hair extensions of a Learning Disabled student. In the coordinator's office she throws a candy dish at the security officer. It shatters when he tries to catch it, releasing blood from a number of points. He is a big man, and when he gets her to the ground face down he can say, *and now you're going to jail, bitch*. Behind her desk the coordinator has the foster mother on the phone. It was something to see, I am told.

The science teacher, when she's in attendance, makes statements that begin, "You are all . . ." followed by a pejorative about the students' collective character, attitude, or ability. I suppose she expects to cow the lot of them. This is a fatal error in judgment. Together, they are stronger than you. If you try to take them all on, you will lose. Of course even in winning, they will lose too. But anyway, they are not all . . .

No one knows what to think of Mr. Rand, whose sixth graders stand up on desks, run about the room, and write dramatic plays set in 500 B.C. Egypt.

For every five regular ed classes there is an LD section. Mr. Farmer is the self-contained teacher for our team, meaning that he tends this one group of children all day. Obviously sixteen percent of our student population is not Learning Disabled; there are additional qualifications that can be considered for placement. He loves to tell the story of when one of them pulled a knife on him, although the tale lost some of its luster when I found out it was a pen knife with a two inch blade. It is now 11:00 and Mr. Farmer is still holding onto the Title 1 doughnuts. Our rooms are adjacent, and while my students pretend to read I move over to the wooden partition to listen in on him. A doughnut is a powerful tool in the hands of one such as Mr. Farmer. I hear the cry of an animal in pain: "*Please… Please can I have a doughnut?*" There is a pause of silent deliberation before a curt decision is pronounced, "No-you-may-not-have-a-doughnut." There is a scream as the boy is broken, "*Please, Please Mr. Farmer…"*

It is a wonder what one can do with 8 ½ by 11 standard ruled paper and an imagination. My boys spend their down time making origami 9 millimeters and cell phones. They forge bills, tearing the paper in the absence of scissors, search the floor for a stray paper clip or rubber band that may be used to fold or roll their fattening stacks. Entire spiral notebooks are consumed in these endeavors. And of course they talk, these just being props for talk, for make believe. It is all just make believe.

It is Monday. The science teacher has called out.

One boy, Ramond, can even make a removable cartridge for his piece. When I give him a stern look he complies: “Yo baby, got to go. Mr. Casey ready to start class.” He says this into his paper phone, snaps it up, and sits up straight. When I begin instruction, he remembers to plug it into the stub of a pencil to recharge.

I watch them read and wonder what they see. My students read stories in black and white, print on paper, and I wonder whether in their minds the heroes of these stories are black or white. When there is no colored illustration, no ethnic lace to the author’s name, I wonder what inferences are made and what semblances of themselves are the result. Sometimes I read to them and wonder whether my voice makes it different.

In the end, I spearhead the largest bust in the school’s history, confiscating over a hundred thousand dollars, thirteen credit cards, three hand pistols, and a semi-automatic machine gun. Ramond went down hard. When confronted he makes me a counter offer: “C’mon Mr. Casey. How much you gettin for this? Let me put you on the payroll,” and his outstretched hand holds more money than I will make in a month. I am tempted. To join in their marvelous game, to play just a day longer, to close my eyes and pretend it isn’t real.

We do have gay students that are open and out. We don’t worry about Khalid though, who is six foot at age sixteen and has facial hair, who runs track and

carries a purse. No, we worry about the other students whom he calls his Sugar Plum, Butter Biscuit, his Cinnamon Bun.

I read about a master teacher who uses a Concern Box in her classroom. This shows that she is a teacher interested and responsive to her students' needs; as well, she is herself open and receptive to feedback about her practice. The Concern Box can be as simple as a shoe box with a slit cut into the top through which students may anonymously slip notes. So I try this. For a week I get notes about excessive homework and the dearth of "free time." I try to redirect my students as to the purpose of the concern box, provide models of what an appropriate concern might look like. The second week the notes read: "so and so called me gay," or "so and so stole my pencil." I hold private conferences with so and so, only to find out that their action was predicated upon being called "stupid" or having their notebook scribbled on. The last day for the Concern Box was the day I read, "I'm concerned that someone will steal the concerns out of the Concern Box." No one seemed troubled when the box was gone.

We are studying the American Revolution and Dominique is missing some fundamental pieces of the back story regarding English Colonization. I ask Dominique if she hasn't had any prior exposure to this time period and she says, "No. Well, yeah. But Mister just wrote the word 'Quaker' on the board and asked us what church we go to." But really, I don't know who to believe, Dominique or this former teacher of hers.

Ronnie delights in the new calculator he has brought to school, though I know it is only a matter of time before the plush buttons are pried off, the screen punctured with a pencil point. Nothing remains intact here for very long. When my room empties I perform triage. I walk the aisles and scan the floor for various pen parts. Inside a desk, a watch has been eviscerated. I find plastic arms that have been pried off of some body, magazine pages that have been torn out and defaced. I once found the splintered remnants of an ornate Japanese fan. Everything they have will be broken. It will be soon be Christmas. Some of them will leave the city for holiday. Some of them will have toys under the tree.

The linen button-down does not fully conceal the story about why there is a Shazam decal on my white undershirt. And down the hall here comes India, excitable and ebullient, who has espied the emblem, who runs to me now and asks me in awe, "Mr. Casey— Are you Superman?" And as a father who never wants to disappoint his daughter, wants her to hold onto the dream but for a short time longer, Yes Virginia there is a Santa Claus, I say to her, "Yes India. I'm Superman." Her mouth goes wide, her eyes go wild, anything really is possible— but then her countenance is all savvy slits. "That's not true," she now tells me. And I come clean: "Yes India, Mr. Casey needs to do his laundry."

Tamika is an MG student, truly Mentally Gifted. I suspect she smoked pot for a while and I worry that her shoddy attendance may jeopardize her chances of

getting into one of the Magnet high schools in the city. For our persuasive essay she argued against the heterogeneous grouping of students, saying that the low pull down the high just as, "crabs will do in a barrel." I worry that my facilitation of her egress has been limited to teaching her the word "heterogeneous." I worry that I am the barrel.

I notice my first gray hair that year. I try not to blame the kids for it.

"Get away from me before I hit you," he had said. Don Shoals is mild mannered, in his fifties and I suspect still smokes pot. He lost it once and tore up a set of student compositions right in front of the class. This did not make the situation better. He stepped out into the hall in order to collect himself, and one worried little girl came out, put her hand on his elbow. She sympathized, "that class is bad." He said then . . .

I make a few deals behind the scenes to get a good draw on Career Day. Our class gets the beautician, the lawyer who cracks jokes about the old hood, and the true coup, the triad of cops. My kids are coy, savvy, challenging about drugs and guns and police brutality. The officers realize the challenge as a mission to better public relations with today's youth. The Q & A carries on, and the captain inquires if they aren't taking up too much of our class time. I know the students are thinking they're getting one over, but I'm thinking who wouldn't want three cops in the room for two hours on a Friday afternoon? The captain asks the

students what authority figures are in their lives. The police. The president, they say. More telling are the responses not given. Parents. Teachers, they do not say.

Sean reminds me of myself when I was his age. He is the one who declines to have his picture taken for the yearbook, opts not to go on the fieldtrips. The girls will say what they may, and he will not be touched by their words. He allows himself to be good at math. I think he is all the more cool for these decisions.

Teachers learn from their students. During professional development, when all the children have gone and it is just us with our principal, we make snide comments, hold side conversations while she tries to say something important, and otherwise ignore her in order to grade papers.

Vic Masters was my appointed mentor for my first year. He was a veteran, a capable teacher I was told. I would see Vic the last Friday of the month when he would come into my classroom with a log sheet that I was to initial here, here and here. “It’s time to get paid,” he would say.

It is Monday. There is no substitute for the science teacher.

In the January of my second year, I actually have a student teacher of my own, me not even properly certified. No one else wants him, as he will either be more trouble than he is worth, or they are too chagrined about their own practices and

classrooms. So it is the blind leading the blind, though I do not tell him my credentials are limited to an Emergency Teaching Certificate, as why call attention to the emergency? The twenty year old white kid shows up in a Slayer T-shirt and ball cap, and I have to put him out as our classroom has rules that we must stick to.

Invariably Don is in trouble with some student's parents. Usually these are Muslim women. During our prep period I walk by his room, see him blushed with embarrassment or anger, I can never tell. I catch swatches of complaints. "She says all you do is talk about your girlfriend in class." Don explains that it was only one time and he was using her as an example for some point he was trying to make. "What business do you have telling my daughter she looks pretty?" Bob explains that she just came in with a new eye gloss, and said that he was just complimenting her, saying the *eye gloss* looked pretty. Invariably he will do something to exacerbate the matter like trying to shake their hands, which Muslim women do not do. But really, who knows the truth of these things?

Those first games were ridiculous to look at. But let them figure it out. Keshawn's opening entails four consecutive moves of his rook. He'll learn. I know he just wants to see what the piece can do. I put together a chess team. They are insatiable, hassle my lunch, try for one last game as I try to send them home at 4:30, find them waiting at my door an hour before first period. During class they hide photocopied chess puzzles under their desks, divining how to pin the white

queen as I draw diagrams differentiating a Federation and a Confederation. I come up behind them, "You know the regular work needs completed first," though I am not displeased when it is rushed. They personalize mating attacks: the Jamal Classic, which eventually just becomes The Classic it being so classic, the Leland Special, Gerald's Gambit. Sometimes I pretend I am a real coach, like a football coach, and illustrate tactics on the black board. I would bleed for those boys.

The students from next door are banging on the wall. Nothing new about that, until I hear one of them cry out for help. They are calling my name. In the hall I see the science teacher using her considerable weight to hold fast the door to her classroom, her students trapped inside. I think, this is a new and interesting tactic. The students cry out my name, plead for help. I should call security but can't quite figure out what to say to them.

No one messes with young Mr. Robinson. He will say it to anyone, that when he has a problem with a student he'll take the kid to an empty classroom, close the door, and just jack him up right then and there. I have always wondered about this, whether or not he is kidding. Because if you kind of laugh to play it off, he'll challenge you dead in the eye and say, "I'm serious." Regardless, no one messes with Mr. Robinson and his students post some of the school's highest scores on the State Boards.

Steven's mom is raising hell in the coordinator's office, and though the door is closed anyone can hear her state for the third time that she has a job and can't be coming up here to the school like this. I suspect that she really just wants the bat back. Steven had brought a baseball bat to school. His story was that he just wanted to show it off to some friends, though quickly ran into the logistical problem of it not fitting inside his locker. For other logistical reasons (we do not have grass) we do not have a baseball team. And anyway, it is February. Toting it about like a cane, he makes it to third period before anyone says anything. He is suspended for three days, is sent home on the fourth day when he fails to return with a parent, and now here is Mom raising hell on day five. The coordinator sticks to the company line: a baseball bat is in fact a weapon; an adult relative must be present for a student to be reinstated. They will go round and round until Steven's mother is exhausted. Then she will quietly ask for the return of the bat. Turns out it was a personal gift to her from a bodyguard of the rapper *50 Cent*.

Aysha, hard as nails, has one visible tattoo of Scorpio and biceps bigger than mine. She meows (yes, like a cat) in class when she is bored with me. She thinks I don't know it's her. She is a resourceful girl, willing to steal for me, which I take as a positive sign in our relationship. In all honesty, it was a mistake. I happened to remark in her company about the high-end chalk Mrs. Reese had, so smooth and such a buttery deep gold on the green slate . . . Aysha, who has run away to live with her sister, comes to my class when she has trouble elsewhere. She slides right into an empty desk, the special guest student for today's show. When there is

opportunity, I will sit with her, ask her what happened. She will say that Mrs. Kessler wrote her up on a pink slip and that she didn't do nothing, and it wasn't even her. When Aysha was suspended for the next two days I come to find out she ate the pink slip Mrs. Kessler wrote, right there in front of her. Others said she was meticulous about it, chewing it piece by piece. (I did not return the chalk to Mrs. Reese.)

The science teacher is the first to raise her voice, though Ms. K isn't too shy about then getting in her face. K is a Non-Teaching Assistant, one of whose functions it is to collect the role books each morning. Apparently there is a problem today between the two adults (I suspect the science teacher hasn't taken attendance), and the students don't help matters by taking sides and giving odds. In the end it was just all talk, although a week later Ms. K gets into a fight, albeit with a lanky student named Terrance. I hear this all second hand, this rumble in the cafeteria, though when I see Terrance I can't help but ask, in his opinion, "Who won?"

My student teacher is properly attired today, though against my stern prescription has insisted that he be introduced to the class by his given name. He has been taught that the imbalanced power dynamic of the traditional student-teacher relationship does not serve the children. He considers himself a partner in learning. "Hi. I'm Rich," he says, and I am glad that I did not do my undergraduate work in Education. The students are saucy to this. One asks if he is really rich and another in white-voice announces, "Hi Rich. I'm Bill," as I try to

shuffle him into the corner and restore order before one world-wise student realizes the more unfortunate nickname. After class I tell him not to worry, that the kids will warm to him if he keeps coming back, and he does, and they do. We develop a small-group literature circle and he works with my emergent readers. At the end of our time together he will say to me, "I learned a lot," though I will question the sincerity of his added, "Thank you." The students will make a going away card that each of them has signed, some expressing their appreciation, some wishing him luck. There is only one student— the boy also known as Bill, who read more in those six weeks than he did last year— that writes, *Thanks for everything, Dick*.

It is March and the math teacher laments the fact that they are still on chapter four of the text. She says they are going to get creamed on the State Boards. They can't add fractions. I show them again and again. They just don't care. They're lazy. All's they care about are video games and what's on TV. I don't know what to do. They won't listen, they won't stop talking. Nothing has consequence for them. They really. Just. Don't. Care. Well, they'll learn. When it's too late. And I sagely nod my head.

During testing, I am a hawk. Nothing escapes me. I see all. John looks around, whispers: *"Psst. Mr. Casey . . . What's the answer to number four?"*

I'm listening to Nateesha tell me about how, "She don't teach." How they do the same thing over everyday. They've been doing fractions for the last month. Everyone is always talking and, "She don't do nothin' about it." She can't even think straight in there. She knows she's behind, they all are, from where they're *supposed* to be at. She says her mom can't afford a tutor. She's ready to quit even trying . . . I tell her I will help. I tell her to stop by during lunch or after school, though this never happens. The next time I see her, she doesn't complain.

I take my class to the assembly that was cancelled. We sit in the auditorium, enjoying the dim lights and wide space. We kick about, and I know now there will be no assembly. But still, there is the kind light and cool air. There is a piano and I ask if anyone knows how to play. Alissa can, and does, tinkling out a bit of *Heart and Soul,* dat.dat.dah . . . da-da da-dah, **dat**.dat.dah . . . and Wendell then has slid up beside her, three octaves down, an accompaniment, dat.dat.dah . . . da-da da-dah, **dat**.dat.dah . . . and the world is good.

It is Monday.

Danielle is a diligent student, attentive in class, readily mediates conflict amongst her peers, is unafraid to ask to questions . . . I will write these things on Danielle's letter of recommendation for high school, but they will be unable to explain, and unable to compensate, her low test scores. She says she freezes up, and I tell her to simply relax, do your best. She says she can't do it, and I tell her she can. She

has been working hard all year hasn't she? When I see the results— she has scored in the 13th percentile in Math and the 21st percentile in Reading— I wonder if I haven't been fooled and should reconsider the B that I currently have marked for her final grade.

I have my first baby. The second one comes a few months later. Now at the high school, Tansiha has written to tell us that it's a beautiful baby girl. We only hear rumors from the street about Diane's beautiful baby boy.

In May I take the team to the City Wide chess tournament. There are over two hundred players here representing thirty schools. The team goes 16-3-1, and Jamal is placed for the championship. The game plays out to what should have been a stalemate. He blows it, and then realizes it, before laying down his king. But he doesn't get mad, doesn't get sullen, doesn't bitch or beat a dead horse's ass. Instead he asks me, asks with such earnestness, all's he does is ask me, "Mr. Casey, are you disappointed?" He will never know. How in that moment I hoped to have a son like him, or wished to know him as a man who would be a friend of mine.

Graduation. My coordinator tells me it's such a big deal because this may be the only graduation many of them will see. It is unfortunate though necessary that each student is only given two tickets for the closing ceremonies. At the door, parents will try to plead ignorance. They will play on the security officers'

sympathy, rolling up baby prams and grandmothers in walkers. Security will be forced to take a hard line with these folks, and the results are often not pretty. Scalpers will hawk tickets on the corner. The going rate that rainy morning was twenty dollars, though surely there was more to be gained.

At the end of the year, a student gathers the attention of the class by asking me, "Mr. Casey, do you think we're prepared for high school?" The question is hopeful. They are excited about their future prospects. Seven students in the class are slated for summer school. I know the retention rates. I know the drop outs begin at this age. The students that have a string of fifty absences coded in the role book, the students whose names are one day no longer on the roster, the students that in the darkest places of our hearts we hope don't show up, because invariably they are the ones that cause problems and everything is better when they are not there. Ironically we say, "You can do so much more when they are not there." I am told that only sixty percent will go on to graduate high school. I am told that a high school diploma here is comparable to a ninth grade education in some suburban schools. That those who do go on to college will spend their first semester taking remedial math and composition. And struggle. "We could have read more this year," is all the truth I can manage. I tell her to keep reading and hope I have said enough.

THE SADIE KINDER STORY

The first time I spoke to Sadie I knew she wanted to get married. Or at least that's what she said. This was at a school dance. We were fourteen. An age when I was trying to act like a man and she a woman, and in a sense, she never learned and I learned too late. At the time, I didn't even like her. It was my friend Scott Francis, who wouldn't let you borrow his colored pencils even though you were his friend, because he knew you would just wind up snapping the points he kept so keen—it was Scott Francis who liked Sadie.

We were in junior high school, Gabardine Jr. High, and we danced in the gymnasium where the girls played volleyball and badminton and other sports in which teams were separated by nets. This was when a girl's attractiveness was decided upon by committee behind closed doors and then released to the public. Sadie Kinder was out and Lisa Myskal was in. But Scott Francis, he was afraid to ask Sadie to dance, so I did.

We shuffled about to the slow tunes, those provocative love riffs of Byran Adams and Aerosmith, and didn't talk much, though I remember what she did say. She asked me what I thought of Mr. Driscoll, the science teacher. I held Sadie about the waist, she had me about the shoulders, and we didn't really know one another at all, and I said I didn't know Mr. Driscoll, I had Richardson for science. She told me she might want to marry him when she grew up. And then she said, "What do you think about that, Marshall?"

Sadie Kinder's questions were ingenuous. She was a girl who never raised her hand in class and when called upon answered the teacher's question with her own. When we were in tenth grade and reading *Pygmalion* and Mrs. Stein asked, "What can we say about the relationship between language and social class?" Sadie answered, "In what context?" She wanted to know how the question overlaps with a person's manners and dress and gender. She wanted to know at what price did Eliza's social advancement come. "Who *is* Eliza?" she asked. She wasn't being smart and she wasn't being stupid, she just read things differently. For Sadie, all the world could be in a word. For a while it was *lace*. And then she would point out a tree laced with leaves, and she would rue her penmanship, which was too pointy and not lacy like other girls, and she would chide me about the muddy lace upon my pant cuffs.

But at the dance I didn't know her yet, and I didn't have an answer for her. I told her, "My friend Scott Francis likes you." She wore a dress that was green and checkered and stale, and I guess it must have been a hand-me-down or borrowed from a cousin because I never saw her wear it again. Scott Francis sat off in the bleachers on the boys' side of the dance and was mostly alone. Sadie tilted her head, considered the proposition, and she never took her eyes off of me. She said, "He seems a little short."

"Yeah." This kind of made sense to me.

She then asked, "What do you want, Marshall?"

Sadie toyed with some embroidered stitching about her dress collar. I had no idea.

Of course Sadie Kinder didn't go on to marry Mr. Driscoll, the science teacher. Instead she went on to Gabardine High, which was big enough for her to disappear and emerge when and where she wanted. I was there, watching her make herself over. She played on the field hockey team, and she started because she could run and because all the girls were equally inept with a stick. She got bad grades for the first time. She started smoking and her grades got worse. She did set design for Mrs. Kowalski's production of *Hamlette* and then wardrobe, and she liked making costumes from real clothes, the way you could fashion a tunic from an oversized t-shirt with a wide belt worn about the waist instead of the hips, the hems stylized with a magic marker. In part, I suspect these things Sadie did after school were just a means to avoid going home with her father, who taught shop at Gabardine.

I don't think I really understood Sadie until I took shop with Mr. Kinder. The class was the last period of the day. Mr. Kinder was tall, seemingly twice Sadie's height, and he wore a burly Fu Manchu that put a mumble to his voice. He'd ask us to take out our books and open to a certain page with a colorful schematic of an electrical circuit, although we would never actually read from them. Instead, he would ask questions like, "How does a thermos know to keep a hot beverage hot, and a cold beverage cold?" The class would be silent and stare at the plaid red thermos Mr. Kinder brought to school that had inspired the day's lesson plan. After a long time someone like Scott Francis would raise his hand and do his best to explain to Mr. Kinder about insulation and heat conductivity,

and Mr. Kinder would seem to be agreeing but then say, "But how does it *know*?" And we would all sit there for some time longer and try to recreate his puzzled look on our own faces. Some of the boys who had longer hair would nod slowly. Really, we were all just waiting to use the power saw.

But the point here is that Sadie would come to his room at the end of the day for him to drive her home. We were always late getting out, cleaning up, and she would not say a word and take a seat at one of the student desks and not look at us. When she came in, her posture would crash and her personality would go blank. The machines would die down and the clatter would quiet as Mr. Kinder checked our stations in turn. We'd skirt around Sadie who'd sometimes wear a pullover with its collar stretched out so that it hung off a shoulder when she slouched. She'd make sure her father hadn't forgotten his umbrella because he'd need it again tomorrow morning, and he'd turn out the lights and turn his key in the door. At my locker, I'd watch them retreat down the emptying halls and consider the sawdust that had somehow gotten swept up in her hair. There was a loneliness in the both of them, and it showed she was an only child and that Mr. Kinder didn't know what to do with a daughter other than to keep the boys away, which he did, regardless, with his queerness. Years later Sadie would fault him for never recognizing that she might want to be desired in this way. "He never told me I was pretty," she said. But my sense was that he had just gotten lost, a long time ago, and then had a daughter, who was growing up lost, and it would be up to her if she wanted to find her way out.

Sadie also worked at the County Seat, two nights a week and on weekends. They sold jeans and other denim garments and leather accessories, and the only drawback was that the manager made the employees dress exclusively in the products they sold. Wonderful fabric that it may be, and granted that this was the eighties, there seemed to be only so much you could do with the denim-on-denim look. Not that it was a problem for her coworker, Amber Wetton.

Amber Wetton went to the private school, Ascension-Catholic, and she was the girl in the movies who moved in slow motion when she came down the hall. When she spoke to you, when you approached her and she said, "What do *you* want?" the words echoed in your head with desire. She had *allure*. And she kind of looked like Sadie. They were both small, each had a strong chin and uncomplicated nose. They both tanned easy and evenly. But Amber would wear this denim shift that was unbuttoned in all the right places and move about so that you'd notice. She wore copper bangles on her wrist that chimed instead of rattled when she looked away from you and smoothed out her hair. Once, when they were both working the floor I pointed this out to Sadie. She was in a funny way because there was this guy she liked from Gabardine who was giving all his attention to Amber. I was checking out Amber and Sadie said, "There's this boy I think I like."

I couldn't help think she talking about me, and this was terrifying, and I didn't know why. I didn't want her to say it. So I said, "Sadie, you need to be more of a lure to these guys."

"A lure?" she said. "But I thought I was supposed to be the fish?"

Sadie made sure the jean jackets were all properly organized by size and style. I asked her if she ever got to do the mannequins and she said no, though she'd like that one day, to fit and clothe their plastic bodies. On the other side of the store, Amber was writing her phone number on the back of some guy's hand. Sadie was putting on red Sale tags. Finally, I said to her, "Sadie, you just need to show off a little."

Sadie squinted when she was angry. She said, "It's a lousy thing to show off, Marshall."

When we met again our freshman year at the local university, she said I had it all wrong. I saw her one morning in the dining hall, sitting by herself, with a bowl of bran flakes and two glasses of whole milk. She ate the dry cereal by the handful and mixed each with a swallow of milk in her mouth to keep, as she explained, the former crisp and the latter cold. When I talked about high school and about how awful it was, what with the boys trying to be men and girls trying to be women, all in the most obvious and unsophisticated ways, she said that's not how it was for her. She said, "There's nothing wrong with unsophisticated love."

"Besides," she said, "we weren't even really friends, were we?"

All right, I was hurt by this. And while on the surface our friendship may have been arguable, I always felt that Sadie and I knew one another in a more intimate, tacit way. She said to me then, with a kind of desperation, "I bet you didn't know that I can open jars that other people can't." She shook her head as though she didn't have it quite figured out either, and she showed me her hands which weren't oversized, and she said that it must be in the grip. I had never

witnessed a demonstration, but I could see it, I could see Sadie opening a jar of olives for Mr. Kinder. I said that I didn't know this about her, and she looked me dead on and affirmed, "My father never appreciated the fact."

Sadie had changed. Who Sadie had become, she later told me, was a person who had made friends with her clothes. At the time, the people we came to know were all plumbing the thrift stores for their fashion, but Sadie had shopped at Value City and Gabriel's since grade school. In a sense, she was ahead of her time. She wore maroon cardigans and mossy corduroys. She liked tops with team names on them. She fancied something about organized sports and would wear a pin-striped baseball jersey for "Big Daddy J's Boys" sponsored by the Locust Bar, or a pearl-button bowling shirt that had *Las Damas Rosadas* italicized on the breast pocket. Sadie had parlayed her awkwardness into something presentable, if not beautiful.

But these people we knew, Sadie called us the cohort. There was her friend Stef and other uninteresting people, and I had the sense that we didn't really like one another. What we had in common was that we all took out loans and enrolled in college for lack of anything better to do. We were still in the General Studies program going into our third year when it got around that the art classes only met once a week for studio. Then everyone in the cohort had suddenly developed some untapped talent. I've always been wary of people who do art, especially when they announce the fact. You need to be self-centered to be creative and that doesn't make for pleasant conversation. For my part, I was into P.E. at the time and filled my electives with racquet sports. In the end, we all

picked up majors that didn't involve exams and had professors who frequented the local bars.

Sadie did textiles. I was wearing a llama-wool sweater she had knit. The holes that were mothed into it, and the fact that one sleeve was longer than the other, was all intentional. She said she was trying to get the sweater into the undergraduate art expo and wanted the piece to look worn. She then added, "Anton asked if he could kiss me." It was a sunny afternoon and we were walking downtown to the record store and we knew Anton because he couldn't get into a popular fraternity and we didn't discriminate. But this was not to say that he should have expected a pass with Sadie. She was telling me that she was at this party, and they both had too much to drink, and Sadie didn't really drink with strangers, and she was going to leave, and he wanted to walk her home. He insisted. He walked her over the campus and when he got to her dorm he said, he made sure she was looking at him, and he said, "You have a really kissable face."

"So what did you say to that?" I asked Sadie.

"I said, 'How so?' What would keep a face from being kissable?" Which goes to show how little Anton knew—he should have just kissed her.

Outside Rick's Music were card tables set with office boxes of vinyl records. Side by side Sadie and I flipped through the worn cardboard sleeves. She was saying, "So we have this meta-conversation about kissing."

"And the last thing you want to do is kiss him?"

She was noncommittal. "He said I had nice lips."

I realized then that Sadie did have a pretty, resolute mouth. Her lips never lost their fullness, even when she smiled. I sweated a bit in the sun. I needed to do something. I needed to take hold of her in some way, but everything was impossible. I needed to see her lips move, so I said, "And?"

Sadie sighed. "And we didn't have anything else to say. I had to go to the bathroom and so I kissed him goodnight."

Part of the problem was that Sadie really did like another guy. Although there was also another girl. Sadie thought this Miles—who remains dull enough in my imagination—was her perfect fit and said to me once, "How come even the boys that are supposed to like me never do?" By this, I gathered that he must have been lonely, in a romantic way, and had an unconventional wardrobe.

He was into metal sculpture and they were both going to be artists you'd never hear about. This was in our last year, and it was summer because Sadie had just done her nails, her toenails. She would do them throughout the season until Labor Day, and when the snows came she would sometimes take off her socks and peek at how they had grown and pushed off the polish, and she would know it was spring when there was no polish left, that's how long it takes the big toenail to grow. Sadie had pretty feet. We stayed the summers at school, and we were sitting on the porch of the house she was renting, and there was the sun and her nails just done in a reflective blue chrome, and she was telling me about Miles. She had gone home with him, a couple of times she said, slept in his bed even. Nothing more. There was no clap, as Sadie put it, no two hands coming together for a brief moment to make noise. He said he loved someone else.

I said, “I don’t know Sadie,” and thought of Kelsey Mayer, the other girl. She was famed in the cohort for saying, “I shaved my head once because I was just so tired of being pretty.” Her follow-through was stunning: “And you know? I did it and I still had guys coming up and asking me out.” And the thing was, boys like Miles loved her all the more direly for it.

Kelsey had curb appeal. Which is a real estate term having to do with first impressions and attracting prospective buyers, and what I was trying to tell Sadie that day in the County Seat. Kelsey had breasts like a Barbie doll that didn’t need props to reveal their shape in whatever she wore. She was a doll in a box with one of those transparent plastic windows where you can see the face and décolletage and she’s not wearing a bra and you can’t afford her because you only have change in your pocket. I wanted to tell Sadie this was a thing of the flesh, an animal thing, a thing about cues and signals and posture. And I wanted to tell her it was real, terribly real, and that it wasn’t fair. And I wanted to tell her she was screwed, and Miles was screwed.

I told her, “Maybe if you put your hair into a braid, like the French do?” I thought it would look nice, but she shook her head and looked at her pretty toes and looked sad for all the world and clapped. “Just once,” she said.

I should have just kissed her.

And then for a while Sadie Kinder was out of my life. We graduated and took out more student loans and went to graduate school, as four years of liberal arts training had left us totally unprepared for the business of living. Sadie went to a school for design in Chicago, and we wrote the occasional letter. It was two and

half years later when she called and said she was home and wanted to know if I wanted to see her.

We went to the White Horse, an old bar in town we'd go to for the jukebox and the fact that you could get a glass of bourbon at a fair price and were not discouraged from carving your name or initials into the hardwood furnishings. It was a place that was never crowded yet never empty, even in the early afternoon. The bartender, Jules, was attractive once, had lost her looks in middle age, and was now gat toothed and full bodied. If she didn't know you and you came into the White Horse, she would ignore you for a long time drying pint glasses, give you time to think whether you were sure you were in the right place. It was peanut night that night and shells littered floor. They snapped under foot. When I saw Sadie again she was sitting with her friend Stef and Anton, the guy who once, obtusely, asked to kiss her. The chair opposite Sadie was open.

At first I didn't get it. Anton was talking, and he always talked as if afraid of not being able to finish a sentence. His childhood must have had its challenges to come out thinking conversation was a competition, and I liked to watch the clock needles spin around when he moved his mouth. I didn't care about him, and he didn't bother me, or only when people I did care about wasted their words with him. Which is why I couldn't figure why he was saying that he wasn't impressed with Chicago or that Sadie didn't need that school for her art she was so talented, or why he had come in with a scarf she had knit, which was not so daring as her other work but was rainbow-striped and sturdy. He put an arm around the back of

her chair, though she edged away from him when he did. She watched me and I watched her. Time was moving. Anton was talking.

Sadie never mentioned any of this when she wrote to me. She would sometimes send sketches and I gathered that she had become a proficient seamstress. She no longer made clothes with holes in them or with mismatched sleeves, the things that young artists do and claim it is experimental. She sent me drawings of the patchwork-quilted shirt to be worn under a tuxedo, the terry cloth sun hat stretched on a wicker frame, the feather duster dress, and I was certain they were all well made garments. Sadie never liked any of the girls I showed interest in. She'd ask about me, and write that I would fall for anyone who made regular appointments with a dental hygienist and had large breasts. She'd invite me to Chicago, and I'd ask her when she was coming home, and there was always something it seemed. But never any Anton.

And then he said they were getting married and that Sadie was dropping out and would have all the time now for her work, and that they were getting married in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia and moving to Ohio. I could see it in his eyes as he babbled on, she was a golden apple he never imagined intended for his lips.

Her friend Stef asked Anton to get us another pitcher of beer. Stef would do things like travel alone through Greece and climb Mount Olympus and cry for the men not in her life. Once, she said that she could have an orgasm, without touching herself, on a long drive with tight curves and full clouds set just right and the sun coming through in streams. She had random moments of ecstasy, she

said, which I think intrigued Sadie. Her friend Stef was a romantic and waited until Anton was at the bar before she asked Sadie if she loved him. Sadie said in her way, “He’s a likeable man.”

“He’s a likeable man?” Stef echoed.

Sadie looked away. She turned back on Stef to say, “He said he loved me, and I said I was fond of him, and he said let’s get married.”

Before Anton came back, she added, “And if it doesn’t work out, we’ll get divorced.” She was confident and unembarrassed and wore a skirt with cowboy fringe. She knew what she was doing.

Stef made a show for Anton and asked to see the ring and wanted to know all the details, which I mostly blocked out, other than the fact that Sadie was sewing her own wedding dress. I knew it would be beautiful. Anton was trying to be funny and Sadie seemed upset, not because no one was laughing, but because he kept trying. I drank and didn’t talk and waited for the moments when he would go away to the bathroom. I admired her legs, which were exposed and tan and laid out on the chair beside me. Sometimes we would make eye contact.

I asked Sadie to the jukebox and let her pick out the songs she liked. We took our time about it. I stood beside her as she turned through the broad pages of album covers, and her face reflected the blue light of the machine. I watched her eyes twitch about the play lists. She was distracted. She said into the jukebox, “What do you think, Marshall?”

I said, “I guess I always imagined you with someone taller.”

"Marshall," she said, "you make sense to me." I nodded and felt like I had missed something. She said, "Anton tells me I'm pretty."

"I make sense to you?"

"You do."

And I waited until we were back at the table before I said too loudly, "Don't do it, Sadie."

Anton said "Don't do what?" and Sadie looked really sad just then, and I tried to think what would happen if I threw a punch at him. She probably would have just left. She wouldn't have much of a choice, which was the problem I was trying to think my way through, what could I do that would give her a choice not to leave. I asked her if she remembered how she was going to marry Mr. Driscoll, the science teacher. Stef was looking at me funny, and Anton was too, and I was kind of getting ready for him to throw a punch.

Sadie was puzzled or disappointed or embarrassed. She said "No. That's not what I remember at all." She said, "What I remember mostly is being alone and feeling alone. I remember going home with my father at the end of the day, and wishing—"

I told her, "Sadie, I was there." She had had her hair done by someone in the city who knew what they were doing. It was tinted and layered and looked breezy when she shook her head. She said, "You can't go back and love me like you were supposed to, Marshall."

"I'm a little slow sometimes." The music came on from the jukebox. I said, "Dance with me." And then Anton said, "What the fuck?" and I said, "Shut

up, Anton," and Stef cried out in an excited way, "Holy shit." I didn't hear from Sadie as Anton wrestled me to the floor. We rolled around a bit amongst the discarded peanut shells trying not to really hurt one another. We made a ballet of it, choreographed to the sweet crooning of Steven Tyler, one of his slow tunes. The truth was, Anton wasn't such a bad guy. He was smart, though he did talk too much, and he'd make money and he worshipped Sadie almost as much as himself, and they would probably be happy, and if not they'd get divorced. I didn't think Sadie would cry. When Anton had enough, the bouncer took hold of me. He was running me out the door, and Jules was on the phone with the police, I imagine, and Sadie and Anton and Stef were staying, and I was in the parking lot. I didn't see Sadie again.

I tried calling her the next day to apologize but her phone had been turned off, so I drove out to the old house. I pulled up and idled by their mailbox, which looked to have been put together by one of Mr. Kinder's less talented students. The driveway was empty. Late morning and the lawn was still frosted over. Winter birds pecked about in the yard. Mr. Kinder appeared on the front porch with a cup of coffee steaming in the cold. He had gone grey but was still as tall as a door jamb. I turned the car off and got out and waved as I made my way over to him. He nodded back. When I asked, he told me that she and the fiancée had left early that morning. Seed had been scattered in the lawn, which drew the birds to the Kinder house. I hadn't changed from the night before and my forehead had gotten cut, but he asked me in for coffee, and I accepted.

We sat in the kitchen and watched the birds feed out the window. We took our time with the talking and I wondered what he thought of Anton. I asked him how the kids were at Gabardine this year and he said he planned to retire. I asked, "What will you do then?"

He measured me, like he had a tape line in his eye. He said, "I'll show you."

Mr. Kinder had to hunch to get down the stairs into his workshop. Yellow light from an exposed bulb lit the room. The air was heavy and warm. Set out on a table were a half dozen wooden cars, each about a foot in length. They were vintage models from the twenties and thirties that he had recreated from illustrations. He made the cars from hardwoods, cherry and maple and black walnut, and shined them with Tung oil. He picked one up and said, "There's close to a hundred pieces in it." Each fashioned with a lathe and file. His shoulders collapsed about his chest as he held this toy car with both of his clay hands, his thick fingers.

I asked then, "Mr. Kinder, did she say anything, ever, about me?"

He held the car like it was a gift he was afraid of breaking, like he didn't know any better than I how he had come to engineer it. He said, "You know Sadie."

I wanted to tell him I was just a kid. Afraid of rejection, afraid of loving his daughter.

I took the model car from him. It surprised me, how heavy and solid it was. The rear wheels turned on an axel, the front doors could open. It wasn't a delicate thing. I said, "I know."

In time we went back upstairs to finish our coffee where there were birds to watch and the light was blue.

THIS IS NOT FICTION[1]

The nuns did nothing to protect Gabe Leeman. Not when he was knocked to the floor of the cafeteria where we carried out our physical education, nor when he stood in front of the class reading the story that scared us—though none of us believed it—that kept us late to our lunch and recess. The nuns were complicit. They allowed these things to happen, and they allowed them to be told as follows. Sometimes I think it was just his name, the reason he was so hated. Gabe. Such an unfortunate name for an eleven-year-old[2]. Or maybe it was the dark denim jeans he wore when the rest of us were bleaching ours light. Maybe it was that he made lay-ups like a fairy, artificially hitching up one knee as he went to the net. Or the blonde curls he let grow in a decade, the Eighties, when the cut of a young Tom Cruise was the fashion. Perhaps if he had it shorn to an inch or two, he could have gone otherwise unscathed through grade school.

He was more the character of Anthony Michael Hall. When we threw snowballs at one another—and we were all one another's targets—we all seemed to throw them differently when they were directed at Gabe, unprotected as he was by a movie script. If this was *Sixteen Candles* or *The Breakfast Club*, Gabe's peculiarity might have been written so that he played more the role of mascot than

[1] Recently, I was involved in a conversation with another writer concerning the distinction between fiction and nonfiction. This is by no means a fatuous issue, as anyone who has ever heard a story, believed it, and then found out it was untrue will concur (especially when you wanted to believe it was true, it was somehow important that the story was true). My friend advanced the idea that nonfiction is formally ragged, like life, while fiction (from the Latin meaning, "to shape, to fashion") is molded. Perhaps consider that the one is the presentation of truth, the other an interpretation. If then the distinction is relevant, at some point the work as nonfiction must be declared.

[2] I do believe there is something to a name. For example, I never met a John that I didn't really like. Matt X(avier) Stalker, a friend of mine from college, I can best describe as disquieting. Before the composition class I'm currently teaching began, I reviewed the roster of names. How would you imagine a Lacy Bloom? An Otto Luffel? Can these things be true? To wit, does a person become molded to what their name implies? In the pages that follow, the proper names of all non-famous entities have been changed as I mean no harm to the actual persons involved in this story. Please note that these changes are in good faith to the patina of their real character.

prey. But this is not fiction, and I do not know for certain what it was that led us do what we did to that boy. I can say that Gabe Leeman brought out the evil and cruelty in all of us.

The fact is, the story here would never be believed were this fiction. That is, were this a fictional account I would never have the impudence to recount something seemingly so untrue. Perhaps that is what nonfiction is capable of—audacity. Because these things happen. In the end, we crucified him.

Let me explain. We were in fifth grade attending a Catholic school. The building was a simple L. The longer leg was St. Michael's church and the other was a two-story, twenty-room schoolhouse. The L let out to an expanse of concrete, which was both the parishioners' parking lot and our playground. In its lap rested a parcel of grass, which we had been instructed to keep off. During recess we regularly played a game of team keep-away. Someone brought in a ball, a football worked best, and the object was for someone on your team to be in possession of the ball when the bell, signaling a return to class, rang. The game was not intrinsically brutal. The tackling was largely good natured; the ripped jeans and bloody joints were more the consequence of the ubiquitous blacktop.

On the day in question, it must have been around Easter because a decorative purple sash had been draped about the arms of the life-size cross staked in this plot. I want to say that the sun was out, the clouds were pulled, reading as a *shhhh* in the sky. But whatever the weather, Gabe was cornered, dragged to the cross, pinned to it by Tom Camarti and John Sweeney while Dave McCarthy used the heavy sash to bind him there. At one point we all stood around and watched him shift his weight to hang more comfortably, the wet curls obscuring his eyes. The girls came out from wherever they had gone[3]. The lunch bell rang. We scattered.

[3] It is an odd thing that in all my memories of this time I cannot remember any of the girls. I couldn't tell you which ones were pretty or which ones were shy. Which ones dressed fashionably and which ones wore too much pink. In particular, they are absent from my recollections of recess. Where did all the girls go? What did they do?

Now here, I don't mean to make Gabe into some symbolic, sacrificial Christ figure. That is, this is not Stephen King[4]. The boy was literally tied to a cross. We were ten, eleven, years old. We hadn't studied symbolism or messianic motifs. We didn't know what we were doing[5].

Part of the problem of what happened next, was that it was not implausible when Eric Boggart (et al.) told the principal that what happened was an accident. We had just finished a rousing game of crab soccer. Unlike team-keep away, this was a co-ed affair. The game is played on all fours with the human anterior facing up, imaginatively akin to a crab. Due to the stress that this position places on the four limbs, the game should be conducted upon a forgiving surface—in this case, candy blue tumbling mats. A beach ball is used, and the only other rule that I am aware of is that the ball cannot be struck with the hands. While I'm sure the P.E. teacher, Ms. Steiner, had established terms for winning, for most of us the game was played in the hopes of catching an opponent (alternately, teammate) unawares and then connecting with a head shot.

A few of the more responsible boys were recruited for clean up, which entailed storage of the gym mats. When folded in three, the mats were three feet by six feet and weighed perhaps thirty pounds. This implied that two ten-year-olds would be required for their removal, though three boys were sent to the principal's office that day. I heard them call it a juggernaut. The three of them—

[4] I had a long drive ahead of me, and a friend lent me an audio edition of Stephen King's *On Writing*. She rented it from the library, and I am unconvinced that it was not intended as a gag. But in chapter nine he discusses the central character of *The Green Mile* whose name he changed during revision. John Bowes became John Coffee, i.e. J.C. In a rather colloquial footnote (indicated in the audio by a parenthetical shift in tone of voice), King acknowledges: "A few critics accused me of being symbolically simplistic in the matter of John Coffee's initials. And I'm like, 'What is this, rocket science? I mean come *on* guys.'"

[5] At this point you may wonder, where was the supervision? I have the sense that we were intended to be observed though a second-story window. Clearly though, the observation was spotty. Other than Father Verbonic, who it was well known smoked cigars, enjoyed more than a glass of whiskey (Chivas, I believe) and an occasional informal wager on a round of golf, other than Father Verbonic who only had custody of us on Sunday and Feast Days, we were entrusted to a cohort of maidens for our upbringing. (Check that—I'm sure Ms. Steiner [see above] knew a number callisthenic routines for the mattress.) Likely, they regarded us as animals, and not without a modicum of terror.

Eric Boggart, Scott Dell, and Nick Pagano— had hoisted the mat over their heads, one on each end, one in the middle, and took a ten-pace dash before hefting it onto the unsuspecting Gabe Leeman. It was something, how the boy crumpled.

As he was taken to the nurse's office and then the hospital with a dislocated shoulder[6], Ms. Steiner escorted the boys directly to see Principal Sister Mary Grace[7]. As they told it, to her and anyone else who would listen thereafter, it was an accident. The thing is, even though they were called into the office individually, they all recounted the same events. They all said it was Eric who tripped, with Eric adding that he tripped over an untied shoelace. You see, they must have said they were helping Ms. Steiner, and they wanted to do it quickly, either to avoid being late for class or to impress the attractive, un-ordained and unmarried gym teacher. They found that three to a mat would be more efficient than two to a mat. Eric tripped. They didn't see Gabe there. They were sorry. It made more sense than the truth, which was that they acted upon an unjustified malice towards one of their peers. They were believed. They left Sister Mary Grace's office with the sound advice not to run with gym equipment in the future. Of course, we were all there. We all knew what happened[8].

All the while, Gabe Leeman was writing stories. In the spring, he approached Sister Mary Arlene with the proposition of reading one of them to the

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[6] In truth, part of the culpability for the injury may reside in biological heredity; he was frail in that way.

[7] That is, it seems unlikely they would have had the time or privacy to concoct a story.

[8] But part of the problem of nonfiction is the stray facts that get in the way. Such as the fact that afterwards Gabe was restricted to a left-handed, that is, off-handed, hook shot due to the sling about his shoulder. (Although on the upside, this prerequisite took his game of HORSE to a whole new level.) Such as the fact that Nick played Atari at Gabe's house just days after the incident. Or that Eric was an alter boy and honor student. And that Scott Dell felt terrible about the whole affair because, he later confessed to me, he was the one who tripped, not Eric. That when I told my mother that Ms. Steiner was my favorite teacher that's not what I meant. These things just don't follow. In recent years, I was caught in an argument between two friends. The one claimed, "It's all text," while the other countered, "No. It's all subtext." For my part, I was drunk and could not wrap my mind around the syntactical agreement of the premise, "It is all." Perhaps in the end, there is this: Gabe Leeman on the cafeteria floor, a mess of athletic equipment upon him. What is more than likely is that he was in pain.

class. It was a longer work, and the Sister agreed that it could be presented as a serial when we had finished our work before lunch. In the end he only ever read the first three installments, and even though each was probably less that 250 words I still think that's something for a fifth grader. I am unsure to what extent the story was complete, either in his mind or in print, as it was discontinued when the nature of the narrative was gleaned.

When he read, Gabe stood in front of the class with his legs spaced in a posture of confidence. Although his lips trembled at the punctuation, his voice did not falter. There was nothing to do but listen. The story was written in the first person and was ostensibly about the narrator's sister. I remember that her name was Jenny. And while I cannot remember his name, as Gabe read on, we began to see ourselves in this narrator. It was odd. We could relate. He played basketball, and even though he wasn't the best, he had a reputation for playing a hard game. He listened to the Beastie Boys and recited verses of their rap, pretending to understand what they meant. He didn't follow the crowd though rolled with it when it came his way. We were a little confused to learn that he didn't have curly hair or wear dark-rinsed jeans. But Jenny, the sister, wasn't getting on with her family. On the third day he told us she got hooked on drugs—I want to say cocaine—got mixed up with a pimp and began to turn tricks. He finished and remained standing at the front of the room. Then Sister Mary Arlene told him to stay a minute. We were dismissed to lunch.

In the cafeteria, none of us knew what to say. We were puzzled by what we had heard. This was all outside our world. This was not the kind of story to be found in our *Holt Reader*, Jenny was not the kind of character to be found on prime time television in 1984. And I do not think I was the only one who wanted to hear more. I wanted to know about drugs and tricks and pimps. Jenny was a bad girl and I wanted to understand the bad things that she had done[9]. But the real

[9] While it is complete extrapolation, I believe even then I had a grasp of the narrative arc, where Gabe was going with this. I suspect that it wasn't really about Jenny so much as the narrator who was going to play hero and save his older sister. I suspect the resolution would have gone one of two ways. One: the narrator successfully rescues his sister, the family is reunited, lesson learned. Or two: the narrator and/or Jenny is/are killed, the parents are left grief stricken, lesson learned.

question on everyone's mind was where the hell did he get that from? Obviously the story was made up, though it couldn't all be made up. This time he was believed. Inquiries were made. While I never got the whole story[10] I figured he was in trouble when my mother asked me the following day, "What's this story that Gabe Leeman read in class?" I shrugged my shoulders. Don't ask me[11].

You see, I do not have a resolution that is not ragged. But what happened was this. My mother sent me to public school the following year so that I might escape the madness of Saint Michael's. I do not know what became of Gabe. If I wrote a story about him now, as an adult, he would be a fiction writer[12]. He would wrap realistic stories around moralistically ambiguous characters, and his readers would understand that they weren't true—even when he wrote in the first person and even when they felt true—and they would want to know what happened next. The writing would exhibit a penchant for descriptive idiosyncrasy and a baritone narrative voice. He would never look back, though in all his stories you would find traces of Catholic iconography, vestiges of biblical parables, and a character who never quite courted the favor of the crowd. He would become famous and people would ask him where he got his stories from[13]. In interviews he would be asked about his childhood and he would say something guarded. He would reveal

[10] Here, the story of Gabe Leeman's story.

[11] For what it's worth, Gabe Leeman did have a sister, a year younger than us. I am not sure if she fared any better at St. Michael's, though I do know my older brother once, accidentally, pushed her down in the aisle of the school bus. The event was exacerbated by the fact that it was winter and a good bit of snow sludge had accumulated on the floor. The sister claimed that my brother then proceeded to step on her, and I still don't believe this, even though she showed everyone at school the footprint impressed on the back of her coat.

[12] That is, if this were fiction. As it is, a cursory Google search of his real name offers a few other options. He could be the technology coordinator at a private school not far from our hometown. He might race stockcars.

[13] People ask me this about my stories. I don't know why they care, why I would need to say Bulfinch plus a joke about a panda Otto Luffel told in class plus an article in last week's *New Yorker* plus the long braids on the pretty barista at the coffee shop plus a muffled word overheard through my office wall. How would I know any better where the hell I got that from? When you call something nonfiction you avoid this interrogation. The answer is inherent in the genre: it comes from then, it is filtered through now. (That, at least, would be my response to the question should it arise.)

something I didn't know. Some little anecdote about how his mother thought he loved art when really, he was in love with the art teacher. But maybe the story he told would run beside my story. Maybe there would be overlap. Maybe there, would be found truth[14]. He would make an allusion for the audience's amusement about being crucified in school. He would tell the story of the first story he ever wrote about a valiant narrator and his sister Jenny, and about how much trouble he got into for that one. He would make people laugh. We would relate[15].

[14] Perhaps the difference between fiction and nonfiction lies in the circumstance of the telling: where is the narrator sitting when he tells his story? I do not mean this in any literarily critical way, i.e., where do we locate the teller. I mean what chair. Because in nonfiction, the present moment of the story is always the occasion of the writing, in my case from a metal folding chair of the type you might find in a church cafeteria or at an AA meeting. In fiction, the narrator is not sitting at my green card table.

[15] A few words about the unfavorable use of the first person plural, we: it should be noted that I was complicit in these acts against Gabe Leeman not just in any figurative sense. That is, I am not making claim to the guilt of an unresponsive bystander. This is what I did: in that we lived in the same residential plan, Gabe and I took the same bus home, got off even at the same stop. I sat behind him this day. As a result of my meticulous spelling I had been awarded a set of erasers by Sister Carmelita. These erasers could be fitted onto the end of a pencil like the tip of a spear—in theory when the original eraser, which has historically been disproportionate to the quantity of lead and the errors of the hand that wields it, was worn down. But I did not and I do not use pencils. I can't stand how dry they write. Really, the dehydrated scratching hurts my sensibilities. I was scorned by math teachers. I was the one in your class who argued, why not an erasable pen? Not that this is an excuse for what I did, which was to tear up the erasers and clandestinely place the pieces atop Gabe's curly pate. The entire ride he didn't flinch, and I thought, what a gag. I had been home from school not a half hour when the doorbell rang. I remember my mother answering the door, and there was Gabe. Slowly he bowed his head and emptied the collected eraser bits into his cupped hands. From around the corner I watched in horror as this scene played out. I understand now that on the bus he didn't want to tamper with the evidence. He was certain to be believed, he must have reasoned. He must have said something like, *Look. Look at what your son has done to me*. I awaited my mother's call. I tried to gauge her anger. And you know what she did? She laughed and told him to go home. I swear, she closed the door in his face.

THE PENNSYLVANIAN

I suppose we all have our moments of judgment, when we must appraise the character of a man as being true or false, either rightly or wrongly. And there was none so more a time of judgment for the good people of Ruen than with the coming of the Pennsylvanian. It was a fine day as I remember, though you could smell the rain in it, the day he arrived on the Red Star locomotive westward bound for Lincoln. We were all up at our Lady of Grace celebrating the holy union of Alesia Dewitte, who had just turned sixteen, and Ron Morris. And as I fancy it, he was just alighting from the train, having come through the Appalachians and Indiana flats, across the Mississippi to Iowa and here, just as the bride and groom were exchanging their I do's. Alesia, the fifth of six sisters, was done up in taffeta and lace, nothing more pretty except three things: her eldest sister Lydia, her youngest sister Lucielle (Lydia and Lucielle now being the last two Dewittes in the county), and the Virgin herself. But as I see it, just as the newlyweds led the congregation out into the summer, their path set with wildflowers, some of the younger children already about a game of ring-around-the-rosie under one of the pavilion tents and Bill Decker tapping a keg of beer, the Pennsylvanian was sifting about the depot for some sign of porter or station master, probably thinking the entire town had been turned over to ghosts.

Course, we all knew who the Pennsylvanian was; he was the brother of Tom Morgan, who was a bad man. Talk was that his liver had simply turned to stone and no more could be done for him. He had kept a few dozen acres poorly

tended until he passed on, and his next of kin was notified, and here came his brother even though it wasn't in time for the funeral. He might have figured it wouldn't be much of an affair anyway—and he would have been right, naught but the pastor and the sexton there to keep him company and Eli the gravedigger, to finish the hole he started—as the Pennsylvanian surely knew his brother better than anyone. Knew, that is, that he was a bad man. But it was there at the depot on the wedding day of Alesia nee Dewitte that I first met him. I was just a boy at the time, and for some reason was feeling glum that day, like I was toting my own personal storm cloud on a string. While Our Lady of Grace—sitting as it did like a Greek temple on the hill—provided a mighty fine view of the Red Star coming around the way, from there looking more like a toy train coming in casual with little puff-puff's of steam smoke, I abandoned the festivities with the intent of seeing that machine up-close and loud.

The Pennsylvanian, him looking half dandy and half cowboy, wore fine striped pants, a snapped brim hat, and a vest with a little bit of ruffle that showed underneath the chesterfield, though one look at those hands crackled as pine bark and you know it would be a mistake speaking impolite to his fashion. As turned out, he was a lawyer and a carpenter and a pure devil with a deck of cards. He had a great leather portmanteau that he hefted with ease around to the front of the depot, which is to say the main street of Ruen. He had himself a seat on the porch, fished for his tobacco, and I suppose it was about then he caught me gawking. Minding more to his smoke, he announced that I must be the mayor and sheriff, the inn-keep and hostler all put together. I'm told I was a quiet boy, not like others

of my age who seemed more kin to mongrel dogs yapping at rotten meat, and as such didn't make much of a reply. I figured with that kind of first impression he may have concluded there was something wrong with me—though there wasn't—though had there been, I would have respected him all the more for not stating as much directly. When he had near smoked his cigarette and I had decided that I liked him, I indicated that they was all up at the church on account of the nuptials. I pointed to the hill. Depending on how good his eyes were, he may of seen the wedding tents, though perhaps they were focused on the cemetery at the other end. He said he was obliged, though he didn't know my name and didn't ask.

And this was how the Pennsylvanian first come to lay eyes upon Miss Lydia Dewitte of Ruen. He was tacking his way up the hill, that suitcase of his not making the incline any kinder, just drowning in all that green of grasses showing off now in the sunlight. He had stopped to take off the chesterfield and looked up to see a woman in her bloomers cresting the horizon. She was running hard and running towards him. And then a man appeared, and then another, and another, until an entire herd of menfolk were there, with a few boys trailing behind, all chasing after her down the hill. As she neared, he took a few steps in her direction as though he were of the intentions to defend her, or catch her as though she were falling and not sprinting like an Olympian, but when she was upon him she carried straight on without even a look his way, putting more distance between her and the men half-undressed of their Sunday finery.

The men parted around him like a stone in the river, but for Charley Macky who lost his wind and pulled up to consider the Pennsylvanian. A new

crowd gathered atop the horizon, mostly petticoats and parasols letting loose hoots and laughter. A few of them were taking turns, little Lucielle among them, looking on with telescopic glasses. Charley was bent over, holding his side, trying to tame his breath so he could say, "Ain't no man beat her now in four years." It was four years ago that Miss Lydia first raced, and in truth, it was on occasion of Charley proposing to her and she telling him that he had to beat her first if she was to think on it proper. They all got a good laugh at Charley that day, although the next year she said she'd beat any man, and she did, and I think they were all surprised, her being so womanly and all, though there was nothing really to say when they were all left huffing. Now I think they did it just for fun, as all the menfolk had long given up on wedding her and started to look over her sisters.

The runners were making their way back up, the men taking their time with slapping and ribbing one another. Miss Lydia strode a pace apart. When she passed the Pennsylvanian though, this second time, she did allow her eyes a curious glance or two. He just tipped his hat as was polite, though the same couldn't be said for the way he looked at her from behind, and what with introducing himself as Tom Morgan's brother, Charley must of been pressed to recall the church teaching how not to think upon a man by the actions of his kin. The Pennsylvanian said he didn't mean to disrupt the festivities and all, but if he could just get some directions to his brother's place he'd be on his way. And Charley said, "I'm sure Jake here wouldn't be too troubled to take you over." He was referring to me, as for one reason or another, I had followed the Pennsylvanian. There had come to be something between him and myself,

something even now I can't explain, other than to say that our stories got tied up together at some point. Charley offered him his mule, though the Pennsylvanian said he'd just as soon walk the few miles and get a better feel of the land.

As I said, there was rain in the day, and no sooner did we clear the church grounds did it come on like it had been holding some personal grudge against us all this time. Now, I don't rightly know where I come from, but Miss Lydia had the kind of heart to take me in and bring me up proper. She said she'd tell me when I was old enough to understand, but I couldn't help wonder what it would be like to have a name of my own. Miss Lydia said it didn't matter where a person come from; what mattered, biblically speaking, was where they planned on getting to. And I thought upon these words as I led the Pennsylvanian through the rain out to Tom Morgan's spread.

Sure enough, it was in a sorry state. It was midsummer, and not much made a show of itself in the field, what with one plot half turned and another gone to pasture. Not that there was any livestock to make use of it. Though Jimmy Harrison would bring over a weather-worn ox the following day, said it was Tom's, figured he'd take care of it, said to think nothing of it. The house itself was in no better shape, one storm shutter warped through the middle and the other off its hinges. Water was coming in from the roof and had near rotted through the floorboards in a spot, a problem clearly begun before Tom had passed. The woodstove looked ready to go up in flames were a match brought to it, so layered it was with black grease. No doubt the flour inside the baker's table was maggoty. I stood a mite behind in his shadow as the Pennsylvanian took this all in,

uncertain as to whether I was being impolite by looking. But I got an eyeful that day of what happens to a home when there is no woman to take care. He set his luggage down with intention. He said, “Thank you, Jake. You carry on back now.” I was going then, but he stopped me. I knew what he was he was going to ask, and I told him, “That was Miss Lydia Dewitte.” And he thanked me a second time.

Of course the Pennsylvanian’s arrival stirred up a good bit of gossip, some speculating as to his intentions in Ruen. I was sent down to Stoppard’s General the following day with a list of last-minute sundries, little things Alesia might appreciate as she got herself situated in her new home. Charley was there, and Joe Groeden, the pair of them perched like birds in a tree, it being Sunday and the General being the only place open other than the church. John-C, the proprietor, was saying that the Pennsylvanian had come to get what he could from the property, that was how people from the East were like, grab all they can get and go on. Charley had a pickled egg in his hand, pondering it. He said that may all be true, but those intentions of his seemed to change mighty quick after he caught sight of our Miss Dewitte, and Joe Groeden said we all knew what would come of that.

Though the conversation went no further, for in happened the Pennsylvanian himself. He went right up to John-C, set down an inventory of what he needed with a fifty-dollar federal reserve note on top. He said he’d take what he could now and be back for the rest and to let him know the balance of the

bill, and for a half a minute I thought he aimed to walk out with that lumber and twenty-four pound sack of flour, and cask of O.K. soap, all balanced across his shoulders, a box of nails in a pocket with an oil lamp round the neck, until I looked out and saw Tom's old ox hitched up to a sleigh. John-C was hustling now and Joe took a cheek of tobacco. Then the Pennsylvanian asked about the mail service. Then he was gone like he came. Charley was finally chewing on that egg he had been admiring, smiling like he had just won a wager. John-C huffed and said he was just minding to his investment, and Joe Groeden spit and said, "Regardless, ain't no good going to come with another Morgan in town."

After our morning lessons with Miss Lydia, Lucielle snuck out of her chores to get a peep at him. We stepped out the back of the house, setting to part ways until lunch. She was supposed to weed the garden. And while she never asked me outright, we both knew I'd do this for her. Not that I minded. The garden was a good place to spend some time in the late morning, sweet smelling, flush as it was with fruit and each day some new surprise waiting to be noticed. As I said, I didn't mind but for the way she began acting on Alesia's wedding. Lucielle was fifteen, and it was as though she just discovered men that day like a new species of bird. As a girl, Lucy was always wanting for attention, and I figured now that it was her time, she planned on getting all she could with those curtseys and twittering glances. She had put on quite a show for the men of Ruen that day of the wedding, though I doubt the Pennsylvanian took notice of her, she

up on the hill with the other ladies, examining the well dressed stranger from a safe distance through telescopic glasses.

While I can't rightly say what happened after Lucielle hied off from her chores, she did come back with an ornate wooden picture frame. She held it out to Miss Lydia who wanted to know what on earth was that and where did she find it? Lucielle said, "It's for you. From the man from Pennsylvania. He said seeing how we're neighbors, and how he'd no use for such trifles."

Miss Lydia did scold her for going over there in the first place, though it's a hard thing to do properly with someone like Lucy. She said she was just saying hello, wanted to introduce herself, though I suspect he caught her spying on him. She's like me in that regard. She held the frame up to the wall we just had papered, looking at it as though she could see herself in it. "He made it a long time ago, said you could get a piece of glass cut, or a picture of yourself made." The red in Lucielle's face was like wild fire, spreading as it did to Miss Lydia. She had already decided what was going to happen to that picture frame. Lucielle added, "He called you my mama."

I was to return it in the evening, and while the Morgan fields would sit fallow that year, the same could not be said of the Pennsylvanian. He'd thrown out half the furniture, had it all piled up outside like a train wreck. He had something underway on a set of saw horses though I found him up on the roof putting on new shingles. A man without a woman needs to keep himself busy, and looking back, that's what I suspect the Pennsylvanian was up to, trying to exhaust himself in the sun, as the Lord only knows how he spent his nights alone in that

house. But as he was coming down I had one more time to practice the little speech I was to recite, and I do believe for the short time I had to prepare I did fairly well. I said, "Miss Lydia Dewitte would like to offer you her neighborly friendship on behalf of the household. And her thanks, though she expresses her concern that your gift may be too sentimental as to be proper. She wants you to know that her youngest *sister*"—Miss Lydia made sure I set that straight—"Lucielle was quite enchanted by it, and that perhaps someday it might prove an appropriate present to her." Then Miss Lydia told me to add, "It would be most kind of you to return, should you discover amongst your brother's affects, a spoon belonging to the family stamped with a D at the hilt." I was staring at my shoes as I said all this, and in that time the Pennsylvania had rolled a cigarette and was smoking. He didn't say anything, and there I was still holding that d—ned frame. Finally he took it and threw it in with the broken furniture. "Sister, huh?" is what he said, and I was glad to have something of my own to say.

"Yes sir. There's six of them," I said. "Though only two still in the house."

He nodded and said, "Well you best tell her I'm not my brother." And he turned back up the ladder, seeming determined to get an hour's more work out of the sun.

By this time the Pennsylvanian must have heard tell of the story of the Dewitte sisters. It was a story we were all familiar with, though each liked to tell it according to their own fashion. Little Lucielle must of heard the story so often,

she mayn't ever thought that the story was her own, she being one of the characters. She learned to tell it growing up, how she would come to tell it to her own daughter, like a fairy tale with that honeyed voice of hers. Not long ago in the town of Ruen, there once was a girl named Elise Laroux, who surpassed all others in beauty and grace. It was said that she could charm the fish from the river by casting just her reflection upon the waters. That the birds would alight, just to accompany the song she sang in her garden. It was said that she had a similar effect on those of her own kind, as there was many a man waiting in line to press her hand for marriage. When Madame Laroux finally decided—for even she fell under her daughter's enchantments—decided it was time for her to begin entertaining suitors, she took her to the soothsayer, as was the custom of her people, to have her fortune cast. They say the old soothsayer had a wart on her chin that would twitch when someone was about to die, and could tell twenty years of your future by gazing into the rainbow colored oils she had you spill into a crock of rain water. And she said that Elise Laroux would be blessed in marriage, provided that her husband did love her enough to accept the fact that she would bear him only daughters.

Reginald Dewitte, one of her suitors, had left Ruen for the city, and in a year made a fortune by organizing the taxi service there. When he had finished with the ungodly ways of that place, he returned to find Elise as lovely as Eve before the Fall. He was so enamored of her beauty, he spent half his fortune building for her the grandest house in the county. (In the years that were to come, he would return to the city and with that remaining half, turn it again into two new

fortunes.) For twelve days he courted her in earnest and there was no finery he did not lavish upon her. And on the twelfth day, as she knew she must if they were to be blessed in marriage, Elise told Reginald that she would be unable to bear him a son. There would be no boy to work the fields or become a doctor, his fortune would be spent and parceled in dowries, and in two generations the Dewitte name would be gone from the county. She said she would understand if he wanted to withdraw his proposal. But Reginald loved her truly. (Although, as some like to tell it, he had spent too long in the city where men convinced one another that fortune telling was just country fanciful, if not the nature of woman.) And in six years, Elise gave birth to six beautiful daughters, each more striking than the last, though none more striking than the first.

In the beginning, Reginald was dutiful to his wife and family, though as each year failed to deliver him a son he grew increasingly disagreeable. Reginald was determined that the seventh year of their union yield him a male heir. He took the train into the city, conferred with the medical scientists, pharmacists and apothecaries. He dutifully massaged their unguents across his wife's belly, administered their pills with a glass of tomato juice as per their prescription. Yet she was certain this quackery would lead to naught, other than to further aggrieve her husband and turn him against her. And Elise loved him truly. So one day, when he was away at the city, she returned to the soothsayer and explained the plight. At first, the old woman said there was nothing to do, but so charming was Elise, so moving her tears, that she could not turn her away. She told her next

time she came to find herself with child, if she avoided the sight of any man for those many months, it would be a boy.

Elise explained all this to her husband and when soon after she found herself with child, she took to her bedroom and would not be seen by any man. At first, Reginald indulged her and made up his own bed in the parlor. Every night he would sit on the other side of her door and talk to her about the things he had done during the day. He would ask if she wanted for anything, and at the slightest indication of a need he'd rouse Aldeth, the charwoman, to tend to her. But a man needs a wife for more than just to tell his day to, and soon Reginald was asking to be let in, decrying that soothsayer for filling her head with nonsense. While she loved her husband truly, Elise would not take heed. And when Reginald's asking turned to begging, she reasoned with him that it wouldn't be long, and when his begging turned to demanding, she pleaded with him that it wouldn't be long. Finally, when he could tolerate no more of sleeping apart from his wife, he got his ax and took down the door. And when he saw her there in the bed, radiant as she was with beauty and grace, he knew he had done wrong and wept. The child came early and it was a boy.

And that's about as far as Lucielle could get before changing the ending, which was that the mother and child died shortly after the birth. The common tell is in the years that followed Reginald went mad with grief, and were it not for the reverend spending half his nights over at the house, he'd of done himself in long before he actually did. The town never got over her loss neither. It was as though all of Ruen was put under a spell. The fields never seemed to yield what people

remembered they once did, and wives started looking differently at their husbands, and sons at their mothers. Even the reverend began to eye his congregation with what might be called suspicion during his sermons. People knew something was wrong, and certain women, when they were alone in the church praying for our sins, claimed they once saw the statue of the Virgin shed a tear. About this time, Miss Lydia started running. And in the early mornings if the fog had burnt off a touch, you could catch sight of her streaking across the Arcadia Meadows.

She was just turning seventeen, and she was the oldest and most say the prettiest and I say certainly the cleverest of them all. It being just the girls in the house and the good woman Aldeth, Miss Lydia figured it was only time before the wolves began to show. So being, she arranged the marriage for her sister Ellen and gave her husband a parcel of the family land to settle. The following year, she saw to it that Eliza was wearing the dress. And then was Amy Lynne, who Charley Mackey ended up taking as his wife, and now Alesia. Not to say that Miss Lydia didn't have suitors of her own. In fact, all four of her sisters' husbands first came to the Dewitte house asking for her hand. As Charley would say, "It wasn't like she tricked you," and he'd ponder some. He'd say, "Not outright at least. She just had a way of reasoning with you. And I'll tell you, I couldn't ask for better than Amy Lynne."

We were getting to the end of July and I was crossing the Pennsylvanian's property heading into Ruen, when he first asked me to run the mail for him. That

pile of old furniture had been done away with, and the new shutters he got up did add a certain charm to the house. When he asked me in, I came to see what he'd been doing, as the butler's desk was so set about with neat piles of paper that it made more an office than a parlor. He went about bundling a stack of letters with twine, asking me to hold down my finger there so he could tie the knot. These I was to take to the depot, though he then retrieved a small wrapped box that I was to deliver to Miss Lydia.

When I got back, Lucielle caught sight of the present, and she near had to sit on her hands to keep from opening it, even though there was a little card attached wih Miss Lydia's name on it. She remarked about what a fine script he had. How pretty it made of the name Dewitte. Then she raced off to go get her sister.

When Miss Lydia opened and read the card, she announced to no one in particular, "Mr. Morgan would like to call on us for a visit." Then she looked at Aldeth and said, "He's even suggested a game of cards." Inside the box was a cameo in the resemblance of some Athenian beauty, threaded on a silk choker. Lucielle flushed at seeing this, and reddened even more when her sister told her the cameo seemed more suited for her. She told Lucielle to turn around so they might see how it looked. But when the ornament was tied, I would almost say that Miss Lydia was a touch envious with how the peach and cream of it complemented the family complexion. After four years of her sisters being showered with the affections of men, I can't really blame Lucielle for acting the way she did. Though I worried about her, as I worried about the Pennsylvanian. It

seemed to me there was a game going on that Lucielle wasn't aware of, though one that she could lose nonetheless. Then Miss Lydia told me to fetch her stationary.

The Pennsylvanian smiled when he read the reply. He read a few parts aloud, looking at me as to ask if they were true. He read the parts that went, "It looks best gracing the neck of my sister," and, "she was quite taken by it." I didn't intend to give an answer, to say how little Lucielle was acting over that cameo, though I suppose I did.

Course, word had spread around town, though not by my mouth, that the Pennsylvanian was out courting Miss Lydia. Some were remarking that he'd fare no better than his brother. Some were joking as to whether she would hide the silver. I'm sure John-C and Charley had a wager on it. But that Sunday the Pennsylvanian showed up with an armload of flowering columbine. Miss Lydia was going to take them, wondering aloud where he might have found such pretty things, though he pressed them onto Lucielle, saying that, "She might be the one to appreciate something pretty."

That was when Miss Lydia said, "Your brother once called on us on a similar afternoon."

"So I've heard," the Pennsylvanian said. "So I've heard."

And then Aldeth led him into the parlor and said, "We don't keep no spirits in the house, you know."

I felt for Lucielle then, still with the columbines in her arms, watching her sister and Aldeth be bad. But the Pennsylvanian wasn't to be agitated, and he said, "I wouldn't think that the case." And then he said, "My brother, he had his trials."

To that, Miss Lydia said, seeming both a concession and an accusation, "Perhaps if he had some sense of family." In the parlor, Aldeth had arranged the set of klismoi around the card table, and Miss Lydia invited the Pennsylvanian to sit.

He said that Tom wouldn't recognize him no more were he an identical twin. He insisted that she sit first. His eyes were on the idyllic wallpaper we had put up, which made it feel like you were looking outside with its white columns and green landscape behind, and he seemed to admire it, as I always had myself. Aldeth brought the tea and Miss Lydia asked me please to get the cards.

All the Dewittes grew up playing a kind of whist, what some people started calling contract bridge. Miss Lydia always played with Aldeth, and if there was anything she could do second best to running, it was playing cards. It's hard to say whether the Pennsylvanian cheated. Although, from my vantage he and Lucielle had a tendency to win when he dealt. And while I never could figure the bidding and scoring, the game seemed rather shorter than it should. That was when Miss Lydia suggested a rematch, which they lost as well. The Pennsylvanian remarked how keen his partner was, and Lucielle of course fell in love with every word of it. In truth, she never seemed short of an ace. Were spades trump, she would have so many in her hand she'd have to stop and count them all. Aldeth insinuated that there was something funny about the way he

dealed, which is why he suggested that they play a third and final game, and forget the first two, and that, “Jake here could deal for me.” I was surprised, as I had nearly forgot myself that I was in the room. Miss Lydia started to remind me I had my studies to take care of, but Aldeth looked her dead on and said, “Let him deal.” And I did, and he and Lucielle smoked them a third time.

We had a fine tea then, although I could tell Miss Lydia was distracted, and I bet her mind was still back on that game of cards trying to figure how they had lost or how they might of won. When we were done, I expected her to see the Pennsylvanian out the door, but instead Miss Lydia asked if he wouldn’t mind appraising the water closet, which she believed wasn’t working as it should, and she feared the worst if left unattended. He came out not five minutes later saying he’d need a few things from Stoppard’s, though he’d be happy to return tomorrow. Miss Lydia said that would be just fine, and instructed him to be sure and charge whatever he needed to her account. She didn’t tell him that she’d have me check the bill with John-C later.

And that was how the Pennsylvanian began spending half his time at the Dewitte place. After he’d right fixed the water closet, Miss Lydia asked if he wouldn’t see about the window sash that was always stuck, which he saw to by removing it and sanding it proper. He designed and built for us a more efficient ice box, one that more readily kept in the cool. He was fixing up two places, all the while those fields fallow. Nothing coming in the fall, nothing for the table and nothing to send to the markets. Some people even began to speculate Miss Lydia

was taking advantage of him, still bitter they'd say, about that silver spoon his brother had stole.

I can say firsthand she was a little quick to temper those days, and it seemed to me there was something inside Miss Lydia she was fighting mighty hard against. I suppose I wasn't my right self neither, what with the way Lucielle began lazing about. But the Pennsylvanian, he couldn't be riled. Every time he came by, he brought a bag of candy for Lucy, something sweet or something sour, or some fanciful little thing made in a factory in the East. I wondered how rich he might really be. I was running his mail for him regular now, and there was as much coming in as he was putting out. I wouldn't have been surprised to find him doing business with Carnegie the way he was spending money. Course, Lucielle stopped doing chores all together. Spent all her time on the loggia, reading, sewing or just sucking on those sweets he brought. On Sundays he'd be invited to dinner after mass, and she'd get all dolled up in some finery ordered from Sears, and always that cameo about her neck. On those afternoons he'd ask Lucielle what she was reading, and regardless of what name she gave, he had some remark or other to say about it. And it was something smart, something that surprised Miss Lydia, and something I didn't quite understand, but made me want to pick up the book myself to try and figure it out. Sometimes he'd pick out a book for Lucielle, and once he did for me, and once he did for Miss Lydia. I remember hers, as that was the one I ended up reading myself. It was by a man named Emerson, and the Pennsylvanian said it had changed him when he was my age, what let him onto a path different than his brother.

But as I said, there was some game being played between Miss Lydia and the Pennsylvanian, one the rest of us weren't invited to. As the summer wore on, she began to get anxious for his visits. And while she didn't need to do anything in particular to make herself look pretty, I noticed she took a little longer coming down when the Pennsylvanian was due. Sometimes they'd spend all of the afternoon just talking in the parlor in such a way that Lucielle would declare she was bored to tears and go off to play with the cats, and then Aldeth would go to see about supper, and then Miss Lydia would say it was time for me to tend to my chores. None of which made any sense to me until one evening in late August when I overheard them in conference. He was on his way home, though you wouldn't think so by the way he dallied with her. I was in the tomato vines and they were off a ways in the garden, staring at the sun going down. Miss Lydia said, "Lucielle's quite taken with you, you know. She'd probably do anything for you."

The Pennsylvanian nodded. It looked like he was about to say something, but Miss Lydia didn't let him. She said all in a hurry, "She's still young. Let's wait until she's sixteen, see how you manage that farm of yours next spring."

"She's more a child, more likely my daughter than my bride." He said, "I'd think I was better suited with a woman having a capable hand and practical mind." He looked at her the way a man sometimes looks at a woman, and I don't think I've ever seen Miss Lydia more pretty or flustered.

She didn't make much of a reply. And then the Pennsylvanian asked her to marry him.

And she said, "I can't." She said, "What'll I do about Lucy?"

To this, he said he'd take care of her like she was his own, and then he said it again, "Marry me, Lydia."

Miss Lydia, she bit at her lip like she was going to regret what she was about to say, and then she said, "You have to beat me in a race, John Morgan, and maybe I'll think on it more serious." The Pennsylvanian, he tipped his hat and said his goodnight, and this made me think of two things. The first thing was he never asked what should happen were he to lose. But then again, maybe that's obvious. Maybe sometimes you just lose and there's enough in that. The other thing was, here was the first time I ever heard the Morgan name said with what might be called affection. And that's when I left Miss Lydia out in the garden staring down the sun.

I went in and found Lucielle lying in the middle of the parlor making a picture sketch, and I couldn't help but look upon her now with a bit of sadness. She wasn't wearing the cameo. I wanted to say something to her just then, something in the way like the Pennsylvanian would, but I didn't have those words, and so I asked about the cameo, and Lucielle, she said to me I didn't know nothing about the ways of love, and I suppose she was right on that account.

The date of the running was set for the following Sunday, and in that time all of Ruen caught word of what was to happen. Now, Charley Mackey had

already told the Pennsylvanian Miss Lydia had not been beat and he had spoken the truth. In her running these last four years, no man had finished near enough to ask her the time of day in a civilized voice.

They agreed upon a flat stretch of Arcadia Meadows, and it was a fine day that day. Miss Lydia told Aldeth to go light on the breakfast and told Lucielle to fetch her running boots. My job was to mark the start and finish, which I did with stakes and colored ribbon. The evening before she was to run, Miss Lydia took me with her to church, where she went directly and knelt before the Virgin. In hindsight, I think maybe she prayed that night to lose. Miss Lydia Dewitte had too much pride to do it of her own accord, and I expect she was asking for a little divine intervention.

Nearly the entire town showed up and they were making a regular holiday of it. All the Dewittes and their husbands were there, Charley of course, and John-C and Joe Groeden, and even the reverend had rushed mass so that he'd have time to get home and change. The Pennsylvanian was the last to arrive. Some started speculating he wasn't to show at all. But he did, and he was looking real determined. He did some stretches at the starting line and tried not to pay any mind to the women whispering about him and the men talking behind his back. In fact, the only person he cared to notice was little Lucielle, who was watching him with the telescopic glasses from the far end of the meadow. As I remember, he tipped his hat to her. Then the two runners came together, not much needing said between them. The Pennsylvanian took off his chesterfield. Miss Lydia put on her running boots. I was to signal the go. I did, and the crowd let out a great cheer.

Miss Lydia took off like lightning cracking the sky. The Pennsylvanian, he ran sure and steady, but of course he couldn't keep up. She ran ten paces to his eight. When she had a fine lead, Miss Lydia took the time to glance back at the Pennsylvanian. She was going to win handily, but when she caught sight of him, she ran twice as fast, faster than I've ever seen. The crowd's cheering started to give over to laughter. Joe Groeden said, "Suppose that's the last we'll see of him." But something happened when she was near half across the field. Something with her right foot, something wrong, like a horse coming up lame. She kept running, but every time her right foot came down it was like she was stepping on a flooring tack. And every time her right foot came down, the Pennsylvanian got a step closer, sure and steady. The people of Ruen got really quiet then. Miss Lydia was trying her best. The Pennsylvanian was catching up. John-C shook his head. Charley took the Lord's name in vain. The Pennsylvanian drew even with her. The Pennsylvanian won the race.

There's not much to tell after that. They were married a month later up at Our Lady of Grace in front of all the good people of Ruen. The bride wore taffeta and lace and there was nothing more pretty that day. For a while, there was some speculation as to how the cameo of some Greek beauty ended up in the running boot of Miss Lydia. But only for a short while. Did he cheat? Maybe. Did that make him a bad man? I can't rightly say. What I do know is that things got better for all of us. The harvest that fall was more plentiful than anyone could remember it ever being. The reverend's sermons seemed to soften and there was no more

talk of the Virgin's tears. Husbands started to appraise their wives with more fondness, and mothers looked more forgivingly on their sons. It seemed that something had got set right with the coming of the Pennsylvanian and the wedding of Miss Lydia Dewitte.

Miss Lydia moved into the Morgan house where she and the Pennsylvanian got on just fine that winter. In the spring she found her silver spoon behind the kitchen stove. The Pennsylvanian, he gave up his law and began crafting the finest furniture in this county or the next. As for Lucielle, being the last of the Dewittes, it was only fitting that she keep to the house with Aldeth and myself. To everyone's surprise she did not get married the following year. Nor did she wed in the next or the next. It was some years later that Lucielle agreed to have me as her husband, and being adopted as I was, it was me whose name we arranged to have changed. I couldn't ask for a better woman than my Lucy. On holidays now, we have the sisters and their husbands over for supper, and their children play with ours. Charley and John Morgan still don't see eye to eye, but I suppose that might be asking for too much. In all, it has not been a bad life.

ON THE INSTALLATION OF A LOG CABIN

"No one notices the fireplace," my friend tells me. We are in Mount Vernon at George Washington's Estate and Gardens. It is July, 2006, and we are inside a log cabin. The hearth conceals a consol wired to the windows. The windows are actually LCD panels showing a wilderness and a light, yet persistent, snowfall. My friend, hired for the installation, points to the fireplace. "I made that," he says with pride. The frame is three-quarter inch plywood, and the brick facing is made from concrete poured into a template and then painted. The logs arranged in the hearth are PVC pipe coated with fiberglass resin. The fireplace has been finished to look as though it has functioned in the past. Everything in the log cabin is, in fact, fireproof. My friend holds his lighter against one of the beams to demonstrate this. The flame causes some discoloration in the fiberglass resin, although there is no smoke. The rear wall is stone, which is Homasote, which is pressed recycled paper that goes up like sheetrock. My friend tells me an art student etched the mortar lines. The ground form of the log cabin is concrete; when painted, it will look like dirt.

We go outside where the maple trees rise to the twenty-foot ceiling of the gallery. In the middle of the trees stands a magnificent looking horse. A mannequin of George Washington will be mounted atop it. The tree trunks are made of pine two-by-threes; these frames are wrapped in chicken wire and coated with fiberglass resin. Fiberglass resin, my friend tells me, is what they use to

make the bodies of cars. The tree bark is imprinted using a rubber mold cast from a real tree, and the limbs are PVC pipe, just like the logs that cannot burn in the fireplace. Currently, the tree limbs are bare. My friend, he says he needs to buy the leaves. He has pictures of trees in late autumn from which to base the patterning.

We are standing on a ground form of poured concrete; when painted, it will look like snow. Set into the concrete are prints, made with bare human feet and horseshoes. My friend tells me about the various mannequins of George Washington. There will be three of them, depicting him at different stages of his life: The Young Virginian, General Washington, and President Washington. Phrenology experts are using his skull and computer imaging to recreate the exact proportions of his body. My friend does not know whether this implies that his body has been exhumed, although he does say that his teeth, which are not really made of wood, are currently on display at the Harris National Museum of Dentistry in Baltimore. My friend and I are looking at the horse, and I tell him that it looks real, and my friend says, "It is real." The horse, in fact, has caused some delay in the installation. He says, "We've been waiting for it to die for months now, and it has finally cooperated."

I ask my friend, and he tells me the installation is made possible by the Ford Motor Company.

We walk across the gallery to Fort Necessity. The History Channel has produced a short film on the Battle of Great Meadows that will be shown here. I am told they have rebuilt the fort on the original site, roughly eleven miles

southwest of Uniontown, Pennsylvania. Here, at George Washington's Mount Vernon Estate and Gardens, they have made a representation of the recreated fort. They have fabricated a section of the palisade wall to create a diorama for the History Channel's video reenactment. The wall is curved, which I learn is significant. The trouble is, no one is sure what the fort really looked like. There is no extant historical documentation. "Necessity," my friend says, "it was improvised to begin with." In fact, the design of the fort has been contested by historians since the turn of the previous century. In the early 1900's some scholars endeavored to legitimate that the fort was fundamentally triangular is shape; others argued that it was a diamond. The diamond camp emerged as the favored model. In the Fifties, our understanding changed. Historians now conclude that the original structure was, in fact, circular.

The installation is scheduled to open to the public in October. My friend anticipates more than a million visitors in its first year. We take in what he has done. "For now, this is as close as we can get," he says. "This is what they'll remember." My friend, he looks at his hands, pares a nail, and it falls to the ground form. Lying there on the concrete, it is something obscene.

LETTERMEN

Curtis Paulsen rode the hump in the back seat and leaned in to talk to Benny and Benny's older brother, Vic. In the distance stood the dark geometry of the high school, and behind it, the stadium lights, opened like an umbrella to the night sky. He was new to the large class of ninth graders at Wendell, and he was thinking of the girl from school and the tiny gold cross she wore at her throat. He imagined some intimate moment with her, holding that cross, flat and plain in his fingers. "Her name's Amy," he said. "Amy Patrick."

Benny said, "Yeah? What's she like?"

Paulsen shook his head. "I don't know, really." He worked a piece of gum between his teeth, hard, so that his jaw rolled when he chewed. "She's in my homeroom, sits in front of me. She does this thing with her shoulders. She sits up all straight and kind of, I don't know, shows them off."

"So, she built?"

"No, that's not what I'm saying. It's her posture."

The two brothers looked at one another, the younger like an unformed version of the elder. Benny had tallowy skin, hadn't made it with a girl yet, while Vic was varsity wrestling, placed second at State's his junior year. Benny asked, "Her posture?"

"Like when she's at her locker, the way she stands."

"Uh-huh," Benny said. "So what you going to say?"

Paulsen sat back as the car pulled into the school lot. “Don’t know,” he said.

They parked and shut their doors in tandem, one two three, and from behind the school building came the flourish of snare drums, the brass of a fight song. The homecoming game was already underway.

As they walked around to the stadium, Paulsen told Benny about this girl, Amy Patrick. He spoke to the ground so he could concentrate and talked with his hands like his father did, who was a contractor, everything that Paulsen didn’t want to be. He and Amy were in the same homeroom, but not in any classes together. He said she must be smart, taking the advanced sections. They came in at 8:05 and nothing ever happened except for a sluggish pledge of allegiance and roll call, and they’d be off to first period at 8:20, but Amy kept him awake and made those fifteen minutes the most imaginative of the day. Like the way she said, “Here” when Ms. Stein called out her name. As though she were talking to him, as though he could feel her presence inside him. And when Ms. Stein next called Paulsen, he replied not to the teacher but to Amy. Here. The way her hair graced her neck, and how she didn’t smell like other girls, like greenhouse flowers, just clean. And she had this confidence, he told Benny. How someone was always at her locker, holding her up before class. She had this maturity.

“She’s built then?” Benny said.

“I asked her if she was going to the game tonight,” Paulsen said.

“Uh-huh.”

“I said I’d be looking for her. And she said, go ahead and look for me.”

"Curt," Benny said. "You going to grow up to be a politician or a poet?"

Benny and Vic and Paulsen clicked through the turnstiles into the stadium. They arrived during the second quarter and the Wendell Spartans were winning ten to seven. Paulsen had never seen anything like this at his old school. Around the field was a wide running track, which separated it from the bleachers. There, parents and alumni sat in ordered rows to watch the game. In contrast, a second crowd, the student body, moved continually about the red lanes of the running track, less interested in what happened on the field than a Friday night in which anything might happen. Paulsen felt the possibilities. This wasn't math class, Sunday Services, or the dead evenings at home with his father. Here, the crowd numbered in the thousands and its chorus rang down the county highway.

The broadcaster gave the play by play. He announced the yards to go and player substitutions, his voice a metallic echo through the PA system. Wendell had the ball, and Vic stopped them at the near end zone to watch a bit of the game. Paulsen asked him, "Who they playing?"

"Salem. City school. Notice all the brothers in the house?" Paulsen saw the crowd divided in a different way then. The knots of black faces amongst the students. The segregated sections in the stands. Vic's eyes remained on the field. "It's a big game," he said. "It's being scouted. Penn State's here. OSU."

Under the stadium lights in his red and gold letterman jacket, with its wrestling insignia and the raised W over one breast, Vic almost looked regal. He seemed to know things. Paulsen watched him carefully. "Not that you'll see

anyone from Wendell in the NFL," he continued. "Maybe Groeden, the center. Or our left guard. The thick and slow players."

Paulsen said, "My dad, he says that—"

"There." Vic pointed to the field as the quarterback handed off the ball. "Watch number twenty-three, the tailback. That's Brad Robinson. White guy. He could bench press all three of us." The two lines clashed at midfield, penetrated one another. Robinson broke a tackle into the secondary.

"Go whitey," Benny said.

Vic frowned. "He's not good enough. He's going to go to some Big Ten school and they're gonna put fifty pounds on him and use him as a fullback. A glorified blocker."

"Kill whitey," Benny said.

Paulsen tried to take on Vic's sure demeanor, tried to hide his own diffidence in it. He hadn't brought a coat and tried not to shiver.

Vic said, "You want to see someone who has a real shot, wait till Salem gets the ball. They got this brother—"

"You see, I got this brother—" Benny said, jerking his thumb at Vic.

"—he'll tire your eyes out just watching him run."

Benny opened and closed a hand as though it were a mouth and said, "—he'll just talk and talk and talk..."

Vic pushed his little brother and said, "Children. Go play." He told them to be back at the car when the game was over or they'd be walking home. Nearby,

one of the local police stopped a pair of kids from Salem. He took a paper cup from them, removed its lid and smelled the contents.

"Yes dad," Benny said.

From behind, Paulsen first saw the shock of her hair, copper and bronze and white. They trailed her through the traffic of students moving around the field, through the elbows and shoulders pushing past them. He grabbed Benny by the arm, pointed to her figure and said, "See what I mean?"

"Yeah," Benny said. "Nice posture."

Paulsen called out her name.

Amy turned and he waited for her to find him. Her eyes flashed when she did.

"Hey," he said. An empty word, just a sound, that nonetheless said everything of his desire.

She wore rainbow mittens, carried a Styrofoam cup that steamed into the night.

"Curtis," she said. "You found me."

He stood up straight like his father was always telling him to. He felt stiff. Her face was calm and expectant.

"I'm Benny," Benny said.

Paulsen quickly added, "This is Benny."

"Hi Benny." She had a woman's practiced voice, a way of making her words say two things at the same time.

Benny made a little salute and looked around to see if there was anyone he knew.

"So what are you doing?" Paulsen asked.

She looked over her shoulder and said, "I'm with some friends on the other end." She asked him, "Do you want to walk back with me?"

"Yeah, I do," he said.

They walked side by side, Benny keeping out of the way a few steps behind. He talked to himself, ran through the lyrics of a rap song Paulsen didn't know. He didn't hear the words, just the rhythm, like a chant in a foreign language.

"What do you think of it here?" Amy asked.

"It's weird," Paulsen said. "Everything tastes different. You know, the water. But like, even lettuce. Seriously, it's something in the air or altitude that makes it taste funny. Just a little off, you know?"

"You like lettuce?"

"Can't stand it."

Amy looked up to the night sky. "Lettuce. What a funny word. *Let us*." She said, "Your friend there's interesting."

He looked back and said, "Yeah, I think he has a photographic memory." As they talked, the game on the field fell away, and the crowd became no more than a coincidence of their being together. The cold kept the smell of her wool coat and scarf matted about them. Their breaths were the only ones he noticed. He asked her, "How come you don't have a boyfriend?"

"How do you know I don't have a boyfriend?"

He shrugged. "I asked around."

"Oh," she said, staring at Paulsen. He wore an earring and kept his wallet on a heavy chain that looped below his hip. He had longer hair, curled behind his ears and a good chin. Clean skin. Amy said, "Boys around here don't wear earrings."

He grabbed at his. "Oh, yeah?"

Her voice was coy and reassuring. "Yeah," she said.

"My dad hates it," he said. "At my old school, I don't think we even had twenty-two players to start. Football, you know? Guys would have to play offense and defense. But everyone knew everyone. People here are different." He said to her directly, "I mean, I like the people here."

She looked down at her pretty shoes and asked him, "Why'd you move?"

How could he explain this to her. That at his old school, he was popular. That all the girls made eyes at him and talked about him in small groups, would get quiet when he passed in the hall. That the boys all called him Paulsen, and that meant something. He would never forgive his father. He said, "I heard this was where all the pretty girls were."

"Seriously, Curtis."

"My father's a contractor. And my mother, she's always on his side. You wouldn't understand. It's stupid."

Amy took his hand and held it tightly. Her lips seemed innocent, red as when fruit newly becomes red. She said, "I understand."

Together they threaded their way through the crowd, moved through conversations which sounded like one conversation, loud and kinetic. They were in their own private space, at ease, and Paulsen felt like he could say anything to her, he wanted to say something important to her, and Amy asked what is was like upstate, and Paulsen answered, too loudly for he wanted to be heard, something he had never said before, but he did, he said, "For one thing, there's not all these niggers around."

Benny stopped. The banks of stadium lights washed out the color in things, made blue jeans into black, made yellow into white and white into shadow. Amy stopped, and Paulsen stopped. She looked at him and her expression was blank, gone over with a hot iron. Paulsen felt his face mirror hers. She shook her head and said, "I have to go." She kind of ran, the way girls run at the knees instead of the hips. Her friends were up ahead and they showed concern when they saw her. Amy grabbed one by the arms and hissed, "Walk," and as they went a dark haired girl turned back to give Paulsen a dirty look.

Benny was gone. The crowd kept moving except for two black men. Maybe they were twenty five, maybe they were still in high school, Paulsen wasn't sure. They wore long coats with buttons. One of them had a shaved head, an expression of disbelief, and the other bit his lip as though in deep contemplation. They both had their eyes on Paulsen.

A cheer ran through the crowd as the football glittered under the lights and arced through the goalposts. Paulsen walked away and tried to keep his head up. The game was into its third quarter and the running track was strewn with trash.

He pushed his way through the crowd, moved against the general current, and knocked shoulders with a student from Wendell. Paulsen opened his mouth to say something. *He knew. Everyone had heard.* "Sorry," Paulsen said. But the kid kept walking, talking loudly to his friend. He hadn't even glanced at Paulsen.

Near the Spartan's end zone, adults and teenagers were muddled together at a concession stand. A circle of students from Paulsen's class gathered to one side. One of the popular sets at Wendell. The girls wore eyeliner and sipped cocoa between cupped hands, looked pretty dressed in fine knit sweaters. The boys wore light jackets with embroidered logos and watches with metal linked bands. Paulsen stood half in line at the concession stand, half at the edge of their group. They were making plans for after the game, getting rides from one another. One of the boys, Antoine Regali, his parents were away.

An older man finally asked Paulsen if he was or wasn't in line. "No," he said numbly and stepped aside.

"Curt, right?" His name was John Rafferty, Raf. "That was you tagged the overpass out on 41?"

"Yeah," Paulsen said and edged closer. The graffiti was Broadway Elegant, a style with sharp lines and exaggerated serifs. The letters, lit with glassy highlights, pushed on one another, expanded into one another. He said, "You should see the stuff I did up home."

One of the girls said, "We drove by it the other day."

"What's it say? I mean, it's pretty," another said.

Raf told them, “It says Farmbrook 248.” He looked to Paulsen for confirmation.

“What’s that?” the first girl asked him. She had a nice voice and Paulsen liked the way her hair was done into braids. He said, “That’s like my signature. Where I’m from, my old street upstate.” He wanted to tell this girl, all of them, who he really was.

“You know anyone can get us beer?” Antoine asked. They all looked at Paulsen expectantly. He thought maybe he could sneak into his house, take a fifth of Canadian whiskey off his father. Maybe Vic had a fake ID or knew a place that would sell to him. “Maybe,” he said.

The girl with the braids said, “It’s like, art. It means something, you know?”

“Not if you don’t know what it means,” Raf said in the way a boy challenges a girl he likes. “I mean, it only means something if, otherwise it’s just—you didn’t even know what it meant before I told you.”

“Neither did you.”

“I knew what it said.”

“It’s still pretty. You don’t have to know what it says to know it’s pretty.”

And then Benny was there. He pulled Paulsen aside and whispered, “Those guys.” He pointed to the two black men from before, standing a ways off in the crowd. They nodded to Paulsen. Benny said, “They’re trying to find someone to fuck you up.”

Paulsen said to the girls, to Raf and Antoine, “Look. I gotta go.”

The girl with the braids looked disappointed and said, “Maybe next time,” and Benny asked him, “Where you going?”

“Home.” He was cold and part of him wanted to feel cold.

Benny said, “Let me get Vic. Just wait by the car.”

“No, I’ll be fine. I’ll walk,” he said in a hurry. The two black faces were gone.

As he was leaving, he heard Raf ask Benny, “What was that all about?”

“Nothing,” Benny said. “Wasn’t about nothing.”

Paulsen passed through the abandoned turnstiles, made his way up the worn path, out to the parking lot. He walked quickly. The game was winding down. From the outside, the stadium bleachers were no more than an exposed framework, an elaborate scaffolding. Tomorrow he would try and forget, and on Sunday he would try and forget, and on Monday he would no longer be able to look at Amy Patrick. He had just wanted to say something important.

Five boys, the shadows of boys, the tallest a head shorter than Paulsen, followed him out of the stadium. When he got to the parking lot, one of them called out to him, “Hold up, Clark.” Leaves cartwheeled across the blacktop.

Paulsen turned to face them. He toyed with the chain to his wallet. They approached, rocking from side to side on their hips. As they came out of the darkness, the parking lot lights flashed across the glasses of one of the boys. Another one joked to the others, “Yo, he called him ‘Clark.’”

They wore puffed out ski jackets with their shirt tails sticking out beneath, and one of them had a grey hoodie over his head with a Steelers baseball cap on top of that. They were young, junior high. The kid with glasses stopped the group and said, “I heard you were sweet, Clark. That so?”

A few laughed, and one of them sucked his teeth. Their faces were shiny and unblemished. Paulsen didn’t know the words to make things right. There was no explaining. When he turned to go, one of them threw an open bottle of juice at his back. It hit with a dull thud, splashed a bit, and did not break when it landed on the ground. The boy with glasses said, “I got a coupon for you, White Bread. I got a coupon.”

They spread out around Paulsen.

And then two larger figures pushed through the ring of boys. One of them, it was Vic in his letterman jacket. He hailed Paulsen as though nothing serious was going on. Vic and his friend, both so broad and pale, took to either side of Paulsen. Vic stared at the boy with glasses. He said, “These your new friends?”

Paulsen answered, “Yeah. They were just walking me home.”

The boy kept his chin up. He looked ashamed, and Vic bore the same expression on his face.

Nothing more was going to happen. The boy with the glasses turned back to the stadium and said, “We’ll see you, Clark.” The others followed, their sneakers scratching on the pavement.

Vic asked, “You need a ride home? You want to wait in the car?” He said, “I got to get brother B. Game’s about in the books. 31-20, Wendell.”

Paulsen shook his head. He didn't want to get back in the car. His father would wait up for him, watching highlights on the local news, and ask him about the game in that stupid way of his. And he'd have to stand there and answer. His father would ask him if he saw Robinson, the tailback, and he would say, I did. His father would remind him yet again how he had played ball, lettered in high school. He'd say maybe next summer Paulsen should consider tryouts, and he would say, I will. All the time wanting to blame him, to exclaim that somehow, this was all his fault.

He told Vic that it was only a mile or so home and he'd rather just walk. Vic shrugged. He and his friend headed back to the stadium.

"Vic," Paulsen called to him. "I didn't mean it."

Vic nodded.

Paulsen said, "I didn't."

Vic said, "Sure. None of us do."

Two girls came around the corner of the school, carrying one another on the arm. They were laughing in a pretty and innocent way, got quiet when they passed by.

"I'll see you," Paulsen said.

"Yeah."

"Tell Benny I'll see him."

Vic nodded. "OK."

The girls got into a car. Momentarily, the headlights snapped on and when they did, they threw a second set of shadows over the asphalt, crossed with those

made from the umbrella'd lights overhead. Music came from the closed windows. Paulsen still hadn't moved. The car eased away from him out of the lot.

LISTEN TO HIM

Tom was on his way home when he decided to stop and see his wife. Lisa worked at this Irish bar, and when he came through the door she was leaned over stocking napkins. A bit of hair was loose and in her face. She had a T-shirt on with the place's name on the back. It was slow yet and light still slanted in from the street windows. A heavyset guy sat at the far end of the bar, three others eating at a table. She looked up and saw him, came down behind the taps to meet him. "What are you doing here?" she asked. She got the hair out of her face.

He sat down on one of the stools. "I'm just going to have one."

"What about Jeremy? Where's Jerry?" she said.

"I'm going to get him now." He unbuttoned his collar. "I'm just going to have one."

She had both her hands on the bar. She said, "Look, Tom."

"His teacher called this morning. Said she couldn't get through to you."

Lisa shook her head. "I don't know. I was home."

He watched her. She bit the inside of her lip. She poured a beer and set it in front of him. Then she went back to the napkins. The heavyset guy at the other end of the bar said something to her. It was a joke of some kind and she laughed, but it was a forced kind of laugh. She checked on the table. She disappeared for a long time into the kitchen.

When she came out, Tom finished his beer and set the empty glass on the bar. He went over to her, and over to the man who sat perched over his drink, his thick arms folded around it. Tom stood behind him, almost touching him, and said

to Lisa, “What time are you coming home?” The guy glanced over his shoulder at Tom.

“Eleven,” she said. “Wait up for me?”

He nodded and went out to the car.

He stopped at the market to get some things for dinner. He went down all the aisles and got bread, and picked out the tomatoes, and got the beer in brown bottles that Lisa liked. The girl at the checkout counter was young, and had to get someone else to sell Tom the beer. It was a quarter past five. He paid for the things and told the clerk to put them all in one bag. Then, he went home.

He left the groceries on the front step and got the mail. He walked over to the neighbors. He rang the doorbell and sorted through the mail as he waited. Caroline answered. She smiled at him and called into the house, “Jeremy! Your dad’s here.”

She turned and said, “He’s such a sweet thing, Tom.”

“I know.”

“Just sweet as a peach.”

He nodded.

She folded up her arms and asked, “How’s Lisa?”

Tom looked at the boy who was having trouble getting into his jacket and said, “How he do today?”

“Well.” She helped the boy with his jacket and said into his ear, “Can I tell him?” The boy nodded and looked at his father.

Caroline said, “We have a surprise for you when you get home. Don’t we?”

“Yes,” he said.

She whispered, “He’s so quiet. So polite.”

“Caroline, you know,” Tom said. “I want you to know how much Lisa and I appreciate this. All this.”

“Tom,” she said.

“OK then.”

She smiled.

Tom said to the boy, “Come on now.” As they backed down the steps they waved together at Caroline.

The boy did his homework at the table while Tom got some things together for dinner. There was lunchmeat for sandwiches and milk and the tomatoes, which he cut for a salad and put with creamy dressing that the boy liked. There was leftover pie in a plastic container for dessert. He wiped down the counter. In the other room the boy breathed in little huffs and scratched with his pencil. Tom snapped on the garbage disposal and he listened for it to sound clean as it ground the tomato cores.

When everything was ready, the boy put aside his notebook and they ate for a while. The boy took a piece of tomato on his fork and turned it over and examined it and then ate it. He chewed it with his mouth closed and shook his

head in swallowing it down. Tom asked the boy, “What are you learning in school?”

“Hn. Dinosaurs,” he said.

“What about dinosaurs?”

The boy shrugged and ate from his plate. Tom finished the second half of his sandwich. He asked, “So what’s the surprise, Champ?”

The boy got out of his chair and went into his book bag and handed his father a drawing on heavy paper. The drawing was a picture of Tom mowing the lawn. Scotty was in the window looking out at him. In the sky was a sun with lines coming out of it.

“That’s real nice,” he said. He put the drawing on the refrigerator and held it there with magnets.

“I’m cold,” the boy said. He was sitting back in his chair, holding his elbows, and rocking slightly.

“You’re cold?”

The boy shivered. “Hn,” he said. “I’m cold.”

Tom put his hand on the forehead of the boy. He bent down on his knees and looked at him.

The boy said, “Ms. Kelly said that dinosaurs laid eggs like birds. Hn. She said that other dinosaurs sometimes would steal other dinosaurs’ eggs.”

“Is that right?”

The boy nodded. “I’m cold,” he said.

Tom said, “OK. Jeremy. Go get your blanket and we’ll watch some TV.”

The boy nodded and went upstairs. Tom checked his homework. It was math, a dozen problems scattered over the page written at crude angles to one another. The answers were all wrong, the numbers random, and in a few places the boy had written letters instead. Tom cleared the table. He did the dishes. He opened a beer and tied off the trash and took both out to the garage. He closed the door behind him and sat down on the step that leveled the house and lit a cigarette. The air smelled of gas and earth. Light from the street lamp came through the row of glass panes in the garage door, and Tom went over and bent his head down so he could look out. He dropped the cigarette and put it out with his foot. He saw the cigarette on the floor and picked it up and put it in the metal can with the bag of trash. A rake and a shovel leaned up in the corner since the last time he used them. He put these back on the hooks mounted to the wall. He found a glue trap that was bare and covered with dust. This too, he put in the metal can. He did what he could to straighten up. Before he went back inside, he returned to the garage door where the light was coming in. Out on the street, a neighbor walked by with her dog.

The boy was waiting for him in the TV room. He was sitting on the floor wrapped in a white blanket with zoo animals on it. Tom stepped in front of him and turned on the set. “What’s the call tonight?” he said.

The boy shrugged. Tom went through a few stations and settled on a show about police officers. The boy watched the program.

When it was time, Tom told him to get ready for bed. The boy nodded his head. Tom asked him, “Are you still cold?”

“Cold,” he said. He picked up his cover and carried it upstairs. The water ran in the bathroom. He appeared at the top of the steps and said, “Night, Dad.”

“Good night, Champ.” Tom lit a cigarette and smoked it. He ran a bath for himself and put on pajamas when he was done. He checked on the boy. He slept on his stomach and his arms were spread out and he was very still. Tom went downstairs and read the paper until Lisa came home.

He waited at the kitchen table for her to put up her coat and take off her shoes. She was smiling when she came in, and Tom put down the paper and said, “I’m going to bed. How was work?”

She narrowed her eyes. “Fine,” she said. She slowly lowered her purse onto the table. “Tom, what’s wrong?”

“I’m just tired.”

He made to get up and Lisa said, “Wait.” She touched him at the elbow. “Have a beer with me?” She saw the drawing on the refrigerator, and she got out two of the bottles and handed them to Tom.

She sat down across from him and said, “Look what Rosemary gave me.” She took out a bit of pot that was twisted up in plastic wrap.

Tom opened the bottles and handed one back to her. Lisa filled a pipe. “Go on,” she said. He waved her off. She lit the pipe and blew the smoke out with a noisy breath.

They were quiet for a while. Tom smoked another cigarette. He looked at the clock in the kitchen and said, “So? How was work?”

“Fine,” she sighed. “Come on, Tom. Be nice to me. I had a hard day.”

“Well?” He stared at her until her face reddened. He raised his hands in a gesture that said, “Well?”

She said, “Nothing. Helen didn’t show. Two guys stiffed me. Nothing.”

“I don’t know why you’re at that place,” Tom said. “What do you need to work there for?”

She tilted her head to the side and said, “That’s what this is all about?”

“I’m tired. I’m going to bed.” He got up. He left the unfinished beer on the table.

“Tom, what the fuck is going on!” she said. “*What happened?*”

Tom rubbed at his face, at the growth of hair on his chin and on his cheeks. He said, “There’s something wrong with him, Lisa.”

“*Who?*” She yelled.

“The boy,” he said. “Jeremy.”

She looked at him hard. She shook out one of his cigarettes. Then she said, “There’s nothing wrong with him.”

“His teacher called, Lisa. He’s not paying attention. She says she wants to test him.”

“Test him? Test him for what?”

“We have to take him to see someone. Someone serious.”

Lisa shook her head. She fumbled with the cigarette.

"He said he was cold."

"*So what? What does that mean?* So he's cold."

"Lisa. I had the heat over seventy. I was sweating, for God's sake."

"Maybe he's just sick. Did you ever think of that? Did you ever think of that!"

"Listen to him."

She recoiled. She softly said, "What?"

"Just listen to him. How he talks. Lisa. There's something wrong."

She put her hand over her mouth. He went over and put his arms around her shoulders. She said, "No. Tom. No."

"We have to take him to see someone."

"No." She shook herself free. "Get off me!"

Tom stepped back and looked around the room, looked at anything but his wife sitting there. "All right," he said. "I'm going to sleep."

"Tom!"

"Just let me sleep," he said.

He checked in on the boy. He lay on his stomach and was still. Tom closed the door and went down the hall. He could hear Lisa crying downstairs. He went into their bedroom and did not turn on the lights. He made his way and got into the bed and waited for the room to turn grey. He checked and set the alarm. He rolled onto his side and put one hand underneath the pillow. The curtains were drawn and then Tom realized that the street lamp had gone out, that the bulb had either burned out or was on some sort of timer. He was calmed by this, although

he didn't understand why. He thought about when they had first moved into the house, about how he felt when the first mortgage payment came and writing the check, how it proved that they had really done it. They were just out of school, and married, and life was moving fast. They had talked about going to Italy that year. Lisa had wanted to paint, she had painted in school. They had talked about having another child and each year decided against it. Lisa said when they had more money, when they had more time. Maybe she knew all along.

Tom got up and went downstairs. Lisa was still at the table, her eyes were sore, and she had the drawing Jeremy had done laid in front of her. The house, the bright sun, it could have been done by any eight-year-old. Tom moved around her into the kitchen and put coffee on. The machine began to bubble and he sat down next to her. She held the drawing in her two hands as though it was a broken promise. She wanted to say something, she opened her mouth several times, and looked afraid. Things were going to be hard now. Tom took the drawing out of her hands and said, "Talk to me. Just talk to me, please."

TENEMENT

We thought we already knew the story. Just another single mother down on her luck.

She looked older than she was, wearing foundation that made her skin seem rough to the touch. Like a very fine sandpaper. In her face, you could see that something wrong had been done to her. And then there was the boy. He was four, maybe.

Not that she was unattractive. John Dougherty, or Dirty John, he noticed her right off. She came in August and there was a man with her who helped her move, though we never saw him again. She was wearing jeans and a red kerchief and had a bunch of yellow hair underneath. The boy, he looked just like her, even a little girly, with her blonde curls. Maybe it was that she was lifting boxes or fighting with one end of a sofa, but she seemed uncomfortable with how to hold herself, how to move about. It made her all the more pretty.

They took 14A, which was like all the others, two rooms and too small. It's hard to imagine what the living was like with the boy, with cinder block walls that kept in the moisture, and a drop tile ceiling that pushed on you from above. All of the floors were tiled too, as though the place was meant to be hosed down when vacated. Because there were no overhead lights, you needed plug-in lamps, and at night you just had to deal with the yellow murk of it all. You had half a refrigerator, half a range and three quarters of a sink. If you were unlucky, you got

a window facing the river, which was brown and still. On the other side you at least had Our Lady of Grace and a little bit of grass to look at, a little bit of stained glass. But inside, about all there was room for was to pace back and forth. You weren't having company, except for maybe a special friend with something in particular in mind to do. And it would be done quickly.

The boy's things ended up all outside in a clutter. Although it was nice to have some color about the place. A red wagon, a yellow truck, a fat blue bat, bright hard plastic. In the parking yard, the mother had a bucket of chalk that he used to mess up the pavement. It was Marion who figured out that he was learning to spell his name. She said, "It looks like 'Isaac,' don't it?" Marion, she took to the mother too, and you could tell she was the closest thing the mother could call a woman friend.

Her name was Aimee Claire and she sang in the afternoon. Her window would be open, and Dirty John's window would be open, and her voice would fill the space in between. She sang the songs that were on the radio a decade ago, when she was young and knew people, songs that could be angry and beautiful at the same time. When she sang, Dirty John said he would stop with his pacing, sit down, open a can of beer and just listen. Feel whole for a moment. A long time ago, back in Detroit, he'd lived next to a singer. Another girl. Only she played the piano too, and it was bad because she played it too hard. She played musicals and it gave him the impression she went to auditions. She could sing, but not like Aimee Claire, who didn't have a reason at all to sing. And maybe that was it. Maybe that was what Dirty John was talking about.

Aimee Claire couldn't get help for the boy until the university started up after Labor Day. August was a hard month for her, trapped up like she was. Although in the end, we all came to think she knew what was she doing. She had come here for a reason. In the meantime, she walked the boy out to the parking yard at seven o'clock, when the day began to regain its temper and cool. She took him out for an hour, like a dog. She let him run a bit before she started calling after him. There was a playground nearby, it was beat down, sure, but we never could figure why she didn't take him over there. While the boy ran about, she'd sit outside and talk to someone on the phone, a woman, because they were always talking about men in a bad way, and she'd smoke cigarettes, and at eight o'clock she'd call across the yard for the boy to get himself inside for dinner. Of course, he didn't want to eat. He wanted to keep running around like any boy would want. And then she'd have to say, a little less nice, that he better be upstairs by the time she counted to five if he ever planned on eating again. The boy'd, he'd usually wait till three before heeding.

It wasn't long before Dirty John took the opportunity to introduce himself. He'd lay off the dope all afternoon, and come seven he'd have some excuse to be out there with Aimee and her boy. John wasn't a bad man. Most of us believed what Marion said, that all he really wanted was the sincere affection of a woman. He wasn't handsome, his nose had been broke and had never healed right, so you'd never trust him by looking at him. And he was a number of years older than Aimee, but still, he had his ways. He'd play games with the boy. He'd shake the boy's hand and pretend the boy was so strong that the force of it was enough to

throw John across the yard. Everyday, he'd come out at seven, and first thing, he'd say, "Shake," and the boy would light up with laughter. They'd play a little catch, though the boy had no coordination and it looked more like a game of fetch. And then he'd get around to talking up Aimee. John, he put a lot of time into her and her boy.

In September Aimee was able to hire a few girls from the college for a couple hours. She was able to get a job herself then, part time, cleaning offices, six to ten. But you could tell she was envious of those girls. Resented them, even though they were helping her out for a fraction of what their time was worth. But the boy, Isaac, he'd race to the window when one of the sitters was leaving. As soon as she hit the street, he'd call out, *Bye*. And the girls, they were all the same, would wave from under the umbrella of street lights and say, *Bye*, and start walking. And then the boy would call out again, and the sitters would get a few steps away, and out of bred politeness call back. *Bye*. And then, *Bye*, he'd say and it was a kind of game then, back and forth, a game these girls were just trying to get out of, to get back to their boyfriends and carpeted bedrooms with enough light to read by, and they'd think they were at a safe distance, but he'd still be calling out, *Bye*, and there was a little bit of scream to his voice then, daring them to respond. After a week, the girls didn't call back to him at all, just blocked it out and tried to get around the corner. And then it was worse, because he'd stretch out the vowel like a demand, or play it into some monotone plaint in the night. Over and over again. *Bye. Bye. Bye*. And it was all on the table then, they were

somehow failing him, but they couldn't any longer say it back to him, and there was nothing they could do.

The Puerto Rican, he came in October. This one day Aimee just up and tells Marion that Isaac's father is coming, is on his way in fact, and Aimee's a little nervous, and she asks if Marion wouldn't mind sitting out with her. So they sat some chairs in the parking yard, and it wasn't long before Dirty John came out with a bottle of Chianti. And then Bialy the Pol joined them with his card table, and some candles when it got dark, and Aimee said they might as well play a game to keep busy. Then Marion told John what they were all doing, waiting for the boy's father, and watched his face cinch up with chagrin. Aimee just put on a fine smile and looked down the end of the street. And what could John do? Tom Darling, who was out of work and spent his days wandering about the neighborhood, he turned up with a couple of big beers that he shared, and then it kind of turned things into a little festival. Aimee, you couldn't really talk to her, tied up as she was about whether this man was going to show or not. She said he was from Puerto Rico and not much else. Marion told her not to worry, and Aimee said she wasn't worried, that she had talked to him on the phone and that he was coming. There was some more drinking, and the boy came out for a while, and Aimee put him back in. A cop car slowed at the intersection, and for a second we thought he was going to turn the corner and break things up. But right behind the cop car was the number nine bus, and getting off it was the Puerto Rican, a duffle over his shoulder. Aimee called out to him, Matias.

Marion was the one who had most of the story, although it still didn't make much sense when you listened to her tell it. They met in Florida, and apparently Aimee was pretty wild back then. They made a run of the time they had together, and then Matias had to go back to the PR. Marion said he did conservation work, was a forester of some kind. He always intended on seeing her again, but his father got sick, and they both sort of let the time and distance get between them. He didn't know what kind of state Aimee was in, and Marion figured she was too embarrassed or too angry to tell him. Whatever the case, four years later she calls him up and says, "Do you remember me?" And then she tells him about the boy.

But that night he came, they acted as though they knew one another like husband and wife, except it was obvious they were acting. You could see the terror in his eyes when they hugged and then kissed, pertly on the lips. She introduced him as Tias, and we were all waiting to see what would happen with John. The two of them shook hands, but instead of locking up like a pair of cocks, they disappointed us all. Dirty John actually asked him, "How long you staying?" A few weeks, is what Tias said. He was soft spoken and polite. He looked at Aimee and said maybe a little longer.

Aimee went inside to get the boy and she came out with him and a disposable camera, and she said to him, "Isaac, this is your father." Tias got down on his knees and started talking real intimate with him, and Aimee asked Marion if she wouldn't take their picture. Marion did. The camera hummed, and when it

flashed, you saw the three of them, their faces pressed on either side of the boy's, all smiling.

Tias was a good looking man, your classic wiry Latino, apart from the teeth. He'd had a lot of bad work done and his smile was more metal than bone. His skin was dark and weathered and it made it hard to judge just how old he was. That night, he told the boy he was going to be a big man someday, and he told Aimee Claire everything was going to be all right now. Whenever she took out her cigarettes, he had his lighter in hand. And when she got cold and shivered, he wrapped his coat about her shoulders. Of course, there were problems, not least of which was the fact he clearly wasn't the boy's father. It only took a glance to see that Isaac wasn't no Puerto Rican baby, not with his blue eyes and chalk white skin. But Tias, he never let on, never flinched when touching the boy, and his voice didn't break when he spoke to him.

Aimee would insist to Marion that it was his to the last. No one said anything, and it seemed like we were all willing to go along with it if everyone else did. So then Aimee told Marion that her and Tias were going inside for a while, to talk she said, and asked her if she wouldn't mind watching after Isaac. When they had gone, Bialy the Pol started speculating about what would bring the Puerto Rican here. He said Aimee Claire was easy enough to figure, but the Puerto Rican? He said it must be for the visa, but Tom Darling said, no, didn't he know? Puerto Ricans were US citizens. And then Dirty John said that he had an idea and it had more to do with the cunt than the country, and Marion said that at

least Tias would know what to do with it, and that's about when things broke up for the night.

For a while, Dirty John took the arrival of the Puerto Rican personally, and you didn't see him out much any more in front of the tenement. It was getting cold so he kept his window shut, but also because he didn't want to hear her singing anymore. Marion said he should have known better than to be trifling with a thing like her.

And just about the time he was getting over Aimee Claire, here comes Tias knocking at his door, putting in his face with its slim smile, reminding him all about it. Tias called it by its proper name, "Marijuana." Tias wanted to get high, which was something John could relate to. So he weighed out a fair quarter ounce on the spot and told him he could get other things as well. But no, it wasn't like that Tias said. He wasn't no addict. He said everyone in the PR smoked, like Americans drank their beer. It was cultural he said. Recreational. Then Tias asked if he didn't want to come up and burn a bit of it.

Aimee Claire had done what she could with the place. In the front room, she had a sofa that had taken some wear, but she had it covered over with some glossy blankets. The eating table she said was her mother's, and it was real wood with some fine work done about the edges. She had some nice things. Fancy picture frames and such. The boy was excited to see John, and first off wanted to shake his hand. John did the vaudeville and then the boy started to run around in circles, saying his name, John, John, John, until he tripped. His head kind of bounced off the ground, and he began to cry. Right off, Tias was on him, telling

the boy, “You don’t cry,” and Aimee, none too pleased about all this, said to him, “Let’s take you down to Auntie’s,” meaning Marion’s. The boy cried even harder, and Tias just shook his head. Aimee picked him up and said she’d be right back. There was some anger in her voice, so John said in a friendly way, “Bye.” And for some reason this quieted the boy. “Bye,” he said softly over his mother’s shoulder.

Which left the two men. Tias put on some Caribbean music and showed John some dried tree roots that he brought from the PR. He placed them in a saucer and lit them and they burned like incense, slow and with a sweet smell, and in time, melted down to a resinous slag. He offered John a beer and sat down with him at the table and began to pick the stems and seeds out of the bag John had sold him. He talked about his work in the PR and how he couldn’t find a job here, spoke with a syrupy accent that made his words stick together, and used words like agriculture and deciduous like they were cat and dog. Words John didn’t know. And then he’d go on and tell him what the they meant. He explained, “Like, they lose their leaves, you know?” And if he wasn’t so polite in the way he went about it, it could’ve been taken as mean-spirited.

Aimee came back and locked the door behind her just as John was lighting up the first pipe. He said, “Your man here has a better vocabulary than the two of us put together.” Aimee made a show that she was all too aware of this. She said, “Doesn’t it make you wonder? I should’ve gone to school in the PR.”

But John could tell Aimee hadn’t expected company, that she was dressed for a more intimate evening. She wore these silky pants and a fine cotton shirt

with a bit of lace that crossed her hips. The top had thin straps and let her shoulders show. John saw that much of her prettiness was in her neck, the sharp fragile bones of her collar. She sat next to Tias and across from John, and they all smoked and listened to the music. They talked and in listening to them talk, John knew things weren't going to work out between her and Tias. For all his schoolroom English and male thoughtfulness, he didn't have a clue about Aimee Claire. And maybe more than anything, Aimee wanted a man that could understand her.

Things didn't get better. Tias did find work stuffing inserts at the newspaper, although he'd have to go to the distribution center around midnight for the next day's edition. You'd never see him then. He'd sleep all day and no one knew what he did while Aimee was out cleaning offices. Although there was the one morning when Tom Darling was going about his business and he looked up and saw the boy in the window. He was actually standing inside the windowsill, pressed up against the screen like a cat. The boy was stark naked and waved to him. Tom said the boy was uncircumcised, and you couldn't believe how little his thing was. And Tom said he was wrong for even having seen that.

Things didn't get better and then things got bad this one night in November Marion took the boy so Aimee and Tias could get out to the bar. They came back after midnight, and it was clear to Marion that Aimee hadn't wasted any time. Tias, he kept trying to take her by the arm, talking in her ear in low tones, but she kept slapping him away like a mosquito. They didn't come back alone either. She was a rag doll of a girl they had met at the bar, who Aimee

introduced as her little sister. She had promised to get Little Sister high, and asked if Marion didn't want to join them for a last beer. Then Aimee had the idea to get Dirty John who'd smoke them up proper. So Dirty John brought up a twelve pack and his other things and then there was the five of them up in Aimee Claire's. That's not counting the boy. Aimee had to keep putting him to bed because this was the most excitement he'd seen in his short life. He kept creeping in from the back room, which was where all three of them slept.

Rag Doll took to Dirty John real quick and nice, seeing as he was the one holding. She sat right next to him on the couch with the fancy covers and made sure he could see a little down her shirt. She was chattering with Aimee about the fun they'd had, and talking a little loud about some guy in cowboy boots, and she put her hand on Dirty John's leg and made sure to brush fingertips when they exchanged the pipe. It was then Marion noticed that under all the make-up the girl was young, real young. Marion wanted to play cards, and once Dirty John got lit up, he liked the idea. Aimee said she wanted to go back out. Rag Doll Little Sister wanted to go dancing, they could all go dancing she said, and no one wanted to mention, what about the boy? When it was clear this wasn't happening, Aimee told Dirty John to help her move the eating table so they could get four chairs around it. Tias started to protest, but Aimee already had an end of the table in her hands, and she saw the boy peeping out again, and she said to Tias, "Would you put him down please?" So Tias went into the bedroom where they kept their television and put on a tape for the boy to watch. Marion said it was going on two in the morning.

When Tias came back, Aimee and Little Sister were talking again about the guy in the cowboy boots. He pulled her aside, but everyone could still hear him say, “You are embarrassing me.”

Little Sister smiled at Dirty John. She said, “At the bar? AC was telling us about this one night. In Florida, right? And she goes home with this guy, only, he’s so messed up he can’t get it up. But oh how she tried. And Tias, he says, can you believe this, ‘What? Like, to get up from bed?’ God.” She drank from her beer. “They met in Florida, right?”

Aimee was saying to Tias it was nothing, nothing happened. He said he saw what he saw, and that was no way for her to be acting. She said she got to go out for one night, *for one night*, and for one night couldn’t she— He said he didn’t want to talk about it in front of the others, and she said, “Good. Let’s play cards.”

Tias had never played before, and so everyone took some time to show him how, and Dirty John even made him a little cheat sheet to keep all the suits straight, and offered to play with him, thinking he could win with anybody. Marion played with Aimee, and Little Sister didn’t have a problem sitting out with Dirty John’s pipe. Aimee must have been on a luxurious high, because when they were about to get started she arched up her back and decided, “You know what? I’m just going to take off my—” and she reached under her shirt and made to unfasten her bra and gave a look like maybe she shouldn’t, and then she did. The next day Dirty John would say she had a chest like Marilyn Monroe. He said she left the bra in the bathroom, right on the bathroom sink.

They played cards, and they had to crack the window for all the smoke, and Tias had to suck in his chair any time anyone needed to get to the refrigerator for another beer. The game required bidding, and whenever it came around to Tias, he bid, even overbidding Dirty John, his partner. They'd get set and the women would get a laugh out of it. Dirty John, who wasn't a gentleman at losing, well you could feel his frustration. At first he'd try to explain what Tias was doing wrong, but after a while, with Marion and Aimee keeping at them with their schoolgirl laughter, Dirty John just shut down and let the game play out. Aimee was sitting on Tias, and it got to the point where anytime Tias laid down a card, Aimee'd just say, "Good lead." Then she'd play her trump.

The women, they had their fun, and then Dirty John suggested why not switch teams. So Marion said that Aimee should play with Tias, which wasn't quite the arrangement Dirty John had in mind. They never finished that game, although Marion noticed Tias wasn't bidding at all now. He just passed it on and let Aimee make the call. Dirty John wanted to take a hiatus and rolled up a fat one. And then Aimee, it was her deal, sort of got lost in her shuffling. It was like she put herself into a trance, and then she said that she learned how to shuffle in jail. Her eyes cleared for a second and she looked at Tias and said, "You didn't know that." She said that's how she passed the nights. She couldn't sleep and would just sit up in the dark, messing with a deck of cards until she figured it all out. Then she'd just shuffle them over and over until the woman in the cell next to her threatened to "cut her tits off" if she didn't quit it. Marion asked what she was in for, but she wouldn't say, so Marion believed it wasn't anything serious, just

that she wanted to say something that might be important or surprising, but wasn't. Then Aimee set the cards down and said to herself, "I want to dance."

"Why don't you just deal," Tias said. She shrugged her shoulders and did.

They played until they were exhausted, until everyone finally realized on their own that nothing else was going to happen that night. It was only then they remembered Rag Doll Little Sister who had fallen asleep on the couch.

After that, Marion said she felt bad for Tias. Here he was. In another country, didn't know anyone, trying to do what's right. Or what he thought was right. Marion said that Aimee, like a lot of people, was afraid of someone with an education. Not on the surface scared, but a deep down shame of her own upbringing. The thing was, she probably was smart, and maybe if she hadn't made a few bad decisions, maybe if she had just a few more opportunities. And then she had that body of hers. Aimee Claire, she'd dance for the eyes of any man that looked upon her with favor. And then she'd turn around and cut him for it.

Aimee must have been just waiting for Tias to get up. Maybe she shook him awake to go at him before he could really think what was happening. It was a Sunday, Marion recalled, as she was listening to the choir at Our Lady of Grace. They sang without instruments and you had to listen to hear the words. They were singing, "All lands, to God in joyful sounds, aloft your voices raise," and there was a prettiness in the way the men's voices and women's voices got together and became something else.

Aimee and Tias, they had it out in the stairwell. Perhaps they didn't want the boy to hear, but it didn't seem like any coincidence that they ended up in front of Dirty John's place. He said he was sleeping and at first he thought she was on the phone, him only catching one side of the conversation.

She said, "What are you doing for my family?" She said, "Be a man. You said you were going to do things. You said you were going to take care of our son."

John said there was something not quite right about it all. Of course, he didn't know what their living was like, but it wasn't so much what she said as how she said it. He heard her say, "You don't want them to hear? *You don't want them to hear?* How about, do you want them to hear when you called me a fucking bitch? Huh?" Then the hitting started. There was a commotion of two bodies seizing upon one another, and she said, "Did they hear that?" The crack of flesh against flesh. She said, "Did they hear *that*?"

"Mommy, you hit my daddy," the boy called from the top of the stairs. Marion, she said it was funny, because he sounded just like her. Doing the best he could for his part in a bad movie. He was crying too, she said, but he wasn't.

Marion was the first to come out. Although one by one the doors started opening as others joined her to witness the spectacle. She was wearing her housecoat and took the boy by the hand.

Aimee said, "I want you out of my house."

That's when John thought he might be needed and started to get dressed. He heard Tias say, "In Puerto Rico, you are not a mother. You are not a woman.

Puta is what we call you. You know? You let him stay up all night, he watch videos. A boy his age, he can barely talk."

"You're a goddamn paperboy." She said to no one and everyone, "I got the fucking paperboy telling me how to raise my son. This is what I get." Aimee went after Tias again, but he retreated down the stairs and then out the door. The people of the tenement followed to watch. Marion picked up the boy and carried him down.

Tias said, "You talk about me. I have education. In Puerto Rico, I have good job. You are in America. And you have nothing. You have none of this. You have a coño. This is all."

"You think you're so goddamn special. Gimme a break. Let me translate that for you. You're an ass." Then she mimicked him and said, "You know? Asshole."

The choir at Our Lady of Grace was singing. The voices filled the morning and they sang, "Fix in us thy humble dwelling, all thy faithful mercies crown."

Tias said, "What kind of woman are you? You say, 'Tias, I need you to come to America.' And I come. You say, 'Tias, I need help with Isaac.' I help. You say, 'Tias, this is our son.' This is not our son." And then it was all there, right in front of him. He looked at Marion holding hands with the boy. He wasn't crying anymore.

Tias said to everyone gathered outside the tenement, "All of you. You live in this country, you have these opportunity. You live like this?"

Bialy lit a cigarette without much interest, and Marion seemed lost in the choir singing.

Dirty John said, “Easy there, big guy.”

“You.” Tias pointed at him. “Fuck you. You think I don’t know what you want?” But there wasn’t any fight left in him. He shook his head. “Enjoy it. It’s sweet as peaches, man.”

Tias started talking in Spanish. He kept backing up out of the parking yard until finally, he turned away.

Aimee called after him, “You ain’t no man.” She let John put his arm around her.

After that, we didn’t see the Puerto Rican again, except for Bialy the Pol who was up one night with a girl of his and looked out the window, and it had just started to snow, and the snow was fat and heavy in its fall, and there he was, riding around in the parking yard on some broken down bike he got god knows where. Bialy said, poor fuck was riding around for hours in front of her window.

Of course, things turned for the good for Dirty John. We figured Tias must have gone back to the PR, and by Christmas, Dirty John had finally gotten into Aimee Claire’s bed. He didn’t go into much detail about it either, as he usually did with other women. Marion heard it from Aimee how John was a good person underneath how he acted and talked. She said underneath, he was in a lot of pain. She said one night he just broke down and cried into her lap. And he was so good with Isaac. And he listened to her, and she’d tell him what it was really

like with Tias, and it wasn't at all like she'd expected. He was a liar, she said, he never did what he promised. Her and John, they talked about putting some money together and about her maybe taking a class at the university. They were going to get out of the tenement and John was going to stop dealing and she didn't want us calling him Dirty John anymore. That's not who he was, she said.

To everyone's surprise, they moved out in March and no one had heard from them since. Not until Tom Darling, who was working again, said he saw them just the other day. They were over in Grover park and they had the boy and the trees had just started to seed. The clouds were pretty enough in the sky and the boy was twisted about on a swing and John and Aimee were sitting and talking close out among the benches. Tom thought better of going over and seeing how they we're doing. He just watched them for bit. He heard the boy call out, wanting John to come push him. John, he got up, but then Aimee waved him back. She handed him a paper cup that she was done with for him to throw away.

AFTER THE FULL MOON IN MARCH

Tom's new wife cut the tomato into a bowl of greens, her hands wet with its juice. At his father's place, Tom had picked a dozen of them, those nearly ready to fall without prompt of his fingers. His father had always tended a garden that Tom would work in the summers growing up. Early in the morning, and again before dinner if there was no rain, he would pull five-gallon buckets of crick water to soak the plants. You couldn't buy tomatoes like those, people would say. Four years ago his father had sold the house and moved into an affordable condominium. There was no space for a garden like he used to have, but he still managed to stake a few plants in the sparse grass along the driveway. He had told Tom, you sow your tomatoes after the full moon in March. In the kitchen, Tom watched as Julie cut large and misshapen wedges into the salad bowl.

That afternoon was the first time he had been over to the place since his father had died. He anticipated the difficulties of the funeral and wake, knew executing the will would be trying, but he was wholly unprepared for the silence of the empty house that awaited him. Wholly unprepared for what he was to find in the basement garage. "They're hard to describe," he told Julie. She did not take her eyes off the knife in her hand. "Maybe you've seen them before. There was a box full of them."

"They're like plaques?"

"Yes. He had made them."

"What were they for, you think?"

"I don't know. He made one for me when I was little. For my Confirmation."

Tom thought their young marriage had been terribly unkind to Julie, taking care of his parents as she did. She would go over to the apartment in the afternoons when he was at work, to help his father with his insulin shots and play the Benny Goodman record for his mother. He wondered which was harder on her, the final days of his mother's dementia, or following her death, the judgmental silence of his father's life. His mother would spin herself around on an office chair with a child's joy as the old record played. She would be far off and only come to when the needle scratched static, asking Julie then to play it again, play it again. She seemed happy, Julie would say as a matter of fact. But it pained Tom to see her like that, so infantile. He could only imagine how it must have been on his father. Yet, he had always taken care of her as though she were a child. "I don't know," Tom said. "I had lunch there. I've already forgot the point of all this."

Julie rinsed her hands under the sink faucet. She said to Tom, "One afternoon when I was over, she said to Pete, 'I want some money.' He was a little surprised I think, a little amused, and asked, 'And what do you want money for?' 'Because I want some money,' she said. So Pete takes out his wallet, fans out all the money he has. She studies the money for a long time, and finally picks out a single five-dollar bill, which she puts in her purse." Tom's mother didn't drive, never held a license. His father paid all the bills, took her to the store, would

rather be poor than see her work. He ate her German cooking without complaint, even after she lost her teeth and prepared every meal as a stew or polenta. Julie dried her hands on a dishtowel. “After she died your father found that five dollar bill still in her purse.”

“She was a different person,” Tom said. “But the same.”

He methodically set the table and asked, “What else?” He wondered what she really knew about his father, who often seemed inscrutable to Tom. In a way, he was jealous of the time she had with him, how he seemed to talk so candidly with her. She said he mostly told stories of when Tom was little, before he left for college. She said, “He told me about when he took you hunting. He said he was sorry about what happened. He thought he hurt you. You know, really hurt you. He said he should never have spanked you like that. He knew it was an accident. And he knew it then, even as he was spanking you.”

“It was more than a spanking,” Tom said. When he was twelve, his father had taken him hunting, and Tom wasn’t a hunter, nor ever would be. They spent the morning tramping through the woods, and the entire time he never saw anything even to aim at. All that power of the gun, impotent in his hands. He didn’t know why he did it. He was bored and it was his father’s fault for not understanding this. He was twenty yards off, and it was just an air rifle meant for small game. It couldn’t have but stung. Regardless, Tom never expected to actually hit him. His father slapped at his thigh as though bitten by an insect. He turned on Tom, and between them passed a look of mutual horror and comprehension. He told Julie, “But it wasn’t an accident. And he knew it.”

Julie brushed the hair from her face. “It took me awhile to forgive him, you know. Your father never approved when we got married.”

“Of course he did.”

“No. At the reception, he didn’t kiss me. You wouldn’t know, but he just pressed his cheek against mine. But he didn’t kiss me, didn’t even pretend to.”

“He didn’t know you then,” Tom said. “He loved you.”

She shook her head. “He loved Grace. In his mind, she would always be your wife.”

It didn’t help that when she was alive, and in her confusion, his mother used to call her Grace. The idea that all the while his father resented the fact that she wasn’t Grace, seemed likely and terrible. It infuriated Tom to think that. He said to Julie, “He never could understand, accept the fact.”

She said, “I finally asked him to tell me about her. Grace. And you know what he said? He said he prayed for you every day.”

“What do you mean?”

“He said it wasn’t always easy with your mother. Marriage wasn’t always easy.”

“Let’s not argue about this,” Tom said.

“There’s nothing to argue about,” she said.

Tom’s father had built their house with the help of his brothers and brothers-in-law. They bought the blueprints, only needing the idea and raw materials. His family had always been wealthy in labor. He worked in the steel mills, handled molten rods of steel and lost two fingers, and he and Tom’s mother

came to live off a pitiful pension and Social Security. They would not move in with Tom. When he first made the suggestion, his father, as was his way, said he would consider it, and the following month they moved into the condominium.

None of the furniture matched. In the old house, his father would pick up used furniture and his mother would reupholster it to her liking. She did each room in a particular color. Tom remembered growing up, there was the blue room, the green room, the white room. When they moved into the apartment, she chose the best pieces from each, tried to find places for them all in that compressed space. The result was dizzying, a rainbow of patterns that seemed to coincide with the state of his mother's health. Tom had a sense of the change the move had wrought on his father, a man who had treated Tom with a month of silence after he was caught cheating on a test, who put up a new roof on Tom's house in one day, working start to finish. But after the move, it became clear his strength was failing him. And Tom sensed he only wished to live beyond his wife and to protect his son from seeing his own frailty.

Julie said, "He used to drive your mother out to the store on Saturdays, would come back to the house to work a few hours in the garden. When you were little, he would watch after you then. He'd put you in his wheelbarrow like it was a baby pram, with two bags of topsoil to make it soft, so it wouldn't tip over. One time, when you got big enough, you crawled out. He said he found you in the cabbages, just sitting there. He said you were such a peaceful child."

"I used to love working in that garden," Tom said. "I mean, as a boy I didn't. I used to hate it, actually. The sun, the smell of the crick water that would

get in your clothes. An acrid smell. I had to go in it, to get water for the plants, and I hated the soft mud that would dry on my feet. But now, when I think of that smell, it's a good smell. Like how your palate changes. You know? How your perceptions change, what you resent and then come to understand and love. I used to hate broccoli too."

That afternoon, Tom had wandered through the rooms, suddenly unsure of what exactly he had intended. Light emptied into the apartment, seemed to still the things within it. There was not an appliance less than a decade old. Plastic flower arrangements that sat untouched since his mother placed them so. The photographs, the one with Tom, and his father holding his hand, both staring at the camera, as though his father had just directed him, "You look it in the eye, son." And the motley furniture. Where would it all go?

He told Julie, it was such an odd thing seeing food, an unblemished plum, in the refrigerator. And his eye-drops and insulin. In a Ziploc bag were duplicates of his identification and insurance card, a list of the medications he was taking. He had been assured this was standard procedure, that the paramedics would know where to look. This among fresh fruit. Tom closed the refrigerator door and opened a can of soup. He ate it cold out of the can. He wiped the spoon clean before returning it to the silverware drawer.

In a chest of drawers was a neat stack of Christmas cards and condolences on his mother's passing. And among them, the announcement for Tom and Julie's wedding. She had to have seen it. She did his laundry, cleaned his bathroom, shared this domestic intimacy with him. Inside the wedding announcement was a

picture from the reception, one that he didn't recognize. There was nothing special about, certainly one they wouldn't have framed, and it was a little out of focus. Tom couldn't understand why his father would have kept this one, other than the simple truth that it conveyed, that he and Julie looked happy.

Tom made one more round of inspections, caught himself moving closet and bureau drawers simply to make noise. He forced himself to take down and box some files, adding only what photographs would fit. He would come back, he told himself. He put together a second box to be left out with the garbage. He would need to clean out the refrigerator.

He was going out through the basement garage with one box under each arm. He reached out a finger to the door opener, the slow trundle emphasizing the weight he carried, his anticipation to be home. In a broadening arc, blue sunlight pushed back the yellow incandescence held inside. And it was this contrast in color and light that caught Tom's attention. He hadn't flipped any switch when he had come down the stairs. He carefully laid down the two boxes, with the day now throwing its full weight against his back. In a corner of the garage, he saw the overhead work lamp. Tom put his hands in his pockets and tried to remember. The light must have been left on these past three days.

Tom moved around the Pontiac, which his father's glaucoma prevented him from driving. The light was set over a workbench and jigsaw. Small blocks of wood were scattered across the surface, a piece still caught up in the saw's vice. It took some time to make sense of it all, but there on the floor was a case holding dozens of the finished product. From what he knew, his father was never

explicitly religious, yet there was little in his life the man needed to do penance for. He attended church regularly, but was never one to preach, never one to mention religion in advice or conversation. But here was all this. Tom thought of him alone in the basement, maybe while his mother slept, working into the night, working to get tired enough to find sleep for himself.

As they sat down to eat, Tom explained, "There's a base block of wood, maybe three by eight inches. On top is glued a second layer of smaller pieces, but a different wood or stain, arranged like the characters of a foreign alphabet. The top blocks, they can't be read. It's in the negative spaces of the base, when you look at it again, that it says, Jesus."

"I know them." Julie nodded.

She looked at him sympathetically. There was something else. Tom said, "He died alone."

"Honey," she said. "Tom. You were there for him. You couldn't have done more."

"I didn't know him. He told me he always planted his tomatoes in March, after the full moon. That's what I remember."

"That's something," she said.

The day Tom had told Grace he wanted a divorce could have been like any other. It was not premeditated, and in his mind had happened all quite suddenly. It was a Sunday and they were taking their coffee out on the back porch. They shared the paper. It was a bright morning. A woodpecker was going at their willow. Tom put down the paper and waited for Grace to ask, "What?" He had

drank too much coffee and felt nauseous, and the world seemed extremely real. He wouldn't be able to take back his words. He was afraid. He was making a mistake. Then he told her.

The anger in her voice took him by surprise. She said, "How can you be so selfish? You can't do this to me. Not now."

She said, "What was the point, Tom? Please tell me what the point was. Of our marriage. *Of my life*."

She said, "What am I supposed to do now?"

There was nothing else Tom could do. He would have to tell his father. But in a way, he never could, and in a way, he never did. Later that day he had driven out to the old house, and his mother sent him out to the garden. Tom remembered, the zucchini were just beginning to flower. He felt like a little boy telling his father some wrong he had done. His father's face quietly mirrored Grace's anger, and in that silence there was something Tom had never been able to learn from him. His selfless father, who had always done what was right, who had never made a mistake, and what Tom needed to say was that in life, you were allowed to make mistakes. And that he wasn't like him. And that just maybe, he wasn't the one making a mistake. And then it occurred to him that maybe his father did realize this. (Maybe there had been forgiveness in that silence all along.) His father showed him the white flies on the tomato plants, how they infested the underside of their leaves. He said, "Look here." He told Tom to get the dish soap from inside the house, and they would mix a solution of it and spray down the plants.

Tom said to Julie, “They were for you, I think. The plaques.”

“Why makes you say that?”

“He was trying,” he said. “I have to believe that.” Yet what would remain with Tom, what he wouldn’t say to Julie, was how incondite, how poor their manufacture. The edges of the smaller pieces were off square and didn’t meet. Puddles of glue shined at the corners, revealed the excess applied. They could not have been sold, nor passably be given as simple gifts. His father’s hands shook from the diabetes. He was blind in one eye. When he was a younger man, his craftsmanship would have been more adroit than a machine’s. There were dozens of them packed in that box, each like a prayer.

(ECHO)

Clouds move over the hills, full and low, piled almost within reach. Residences scale down the opposing hillsides to the valley below. Some are villas, clandestine in the woods. And in the basin, Arcadia Junior High sits square and neat, Corinthian columns gracing the broad steps to the main entrance. A scatter of leaves lie about, get picked up by the wind, settle again. The doors have been opened to the vaulted limestone hall hung with juvenile artwork—charcoals, oils, a collection of crude and stylized self-portraits.

In the cafeteria, student voices gather and get loud behind closed doors. A bell sounds, signaling release. The teachers emerge from their rooms in unison as students spill out into the hall, excited and confused. Even veteran teachers are initially inclined to run. Disciplined or devoted, they hold their ground, wading through the faces, the eyes rolled back in terror and half-lidded nonchalance. Today they will have names, and in the ensuing months, personalities, interests, new hair styles, an instructional reading level, ADHD, drug problems. And all this still but the surface of things. When the late bell rings, invariably a student will be left outside following the room numbers in a daze, footfalls echoing in the corridors. Students often get lost in these halls.

Collete enters the room with her books guarding her chest, and the teacher says something about fashionably late not applying to her class. All heads turn, the desired effect, and their eyes follow her as she moves to the seat Adena has saved. Adena arrived early and took a desk on the far wall so as watch each

entering student. Last year her attention was drawn to the girls, making notes of their attire, their coloring, the bags they carried, which ones to stay away from, which ones she needed to know. This September she studies the boys. Their build and bone structure. As they come into the classroom, on their own or in prides, she takes their tops offs, runs her hands over the taut skin or loose flesh. Through their hair, clean or over-washed or greasy. She touches each of them. She's in a good looking class in a good looking school, in a valley of good looking people. But there's something else. Something more subtle, yet more telling, something the boys are conscious of as well. Posture and grace. How they carry themselves. They're belied by how they enter the classroom, day one. Adena follows the movements of hips, the roll of shoulders, the angle at which the chin is held. She thinks it delicious that no one seems to notice her, head against the wall, taking them apart one by one.

He comes in with a small crowd, and Adena notes that little Nico has grown up. What before was pony cute in him has come unbridled. Collette has primly centered her books on her desk, sits up straight as though to announce that class can now begin. Adena leans to her and whispers, wonders if she hasn't seen Nicodemus. With the end of her pencil, she draws Collette's attention to where he's seated several rows to the front. Collette shrugs. As the teacher moves through the roll call, Adena sits back and studies his profile. He plays a girl's game with his hair, toying with the locks that keep falling from behind his ear. His chin is still smooth, his nose shapely, his ear a delicate thing. Adena so anticipates his voice, that she misses her own name being announced. The teacher

calls it again, and the entire class turns to her, catching her with wide eyes and parted lips, and Nico among them, who takes her in full. *Here*, she whispers.

Above the hills, the clouds are poor sculptures worked with rough hands. A bird blackened by distance, circles and turns on wing away. In the valley, boys play basketball on the streets, each cul-de-sac an impromptu court. Nico moves the ball like a see-saw between his legs. He rocks forward and back, shuffles on his feet in a slow dance. A curl of D'Marco's dark hair falls across his face as he tries to take the ball away. The two boys keep their eyes on one another, locked by the sound of the dribble. Without warning, Nico drives to the basket and alights from the net. They play one-on-one, say it isn't about the score, though it's never a question of who will win. Nico keeps the ball, returns it to the top of the key, and beats a rhythm into the blacktop.

Adena lifts her head and looks out her bedroom window. The sun is falling, pulling the color from still cars. With the settling fog, mailboxes and streetlamps begin to glisten. She fancies Nico is out there playing basketball. She pushes her lips out, parts them, and blows a bubble. The gum matches the shade of her lip gloss. Pink has returned in force this summer, pushed by the fashion and lifestyle magazines. She lies atop the bed's comforter, dangling her feet in the air. She plays with her hair, makes twists between two fingers. She frowns. She reads the magazine survey, *Your teacher caught you passing a note in class and read it*

aloud. You're: a) not bothered… b) mortified… c) in serious trouble because you wrote a few things about a friend you haven't said to her face.

She looks again at the title page, the question posed in direct address, *Do Cliques Rule Your Life?* Adena rolls onto her back and stares down the ceiling. She doesn't want it to be this way. So concerned what others will say. But how can the other girls not have taken notice of him? His features are a composition of red and white, with his unblemished skin and his cheeks that seem permanently blushed, like a painting that can only approximate, or idealize, the real. His lips are perfectly watermelon. The other girls would soon see. There would soon be talk.

Adena retrieves her phone and roves through the call menu. When she has Collette on the line, she says, "Listen to this."

There are no stammers, no pauses, the conversation seamless. They have so much to say. They talk to the very edge of things. Subjects naturally flow together. Cliques lead to Heather and her cloying desire to be liked, to Lauren, who Heather openly snubbed that day upon their suggestion, in the cafeteria, where she decried the eating of carrots, wouldn't even think about eating carrots, a vegetable that either Lauren particularly enjoyed or believed in the nutritional/ dietetic value of. Their punctuation comprises sighs and laughter. Their grammar contains twelve distinct sighs, each with a different function and meaning. Their voices well and ebb; they take turns being the sea, the sand. They talk. Collette talks at length and Adena lets her know she is there, as well directs her line of discourse with various intonations of Mm. Mm, Mmm? M! *Mmmm*…

But really, Adena is looking at herself in a full length mirror. Collette's voice is excited, she's talking about boys. And Adena springs to her feet, carries the phone to the mirror, looks at herself front-ways and profile. She gathers the extra material of her T-shirt in a knot behind her and pulls it tight against her front. She turns, gazes at herself over a shoulder. She's not totally dissatisfied. And for a moment, she nearly loses herself in her own reflection, nearly drops the phone to the carpet, with Collette still carrying on.

She turns from the mirror and asks, "Do you think I'm a girly girl?" This from another magazine survey, monthly variants of one another, all asking and addressing the same question. Who is the real you? Thoughtfully, the writer provides three to five answers. The reader is presented with a series of hypothetical situations in which to place themselves and a multiple choice for what they would do. The responses should be mindless, one's first instinct. When answered, the reader is asked to do a tally, perhaps some light math. The results should come as surprisingly obvious. In the end, you are reassured you knew all along who you are. Or, who you want to be.

What's Your Fashion Style? Of the five alternatives, Adena is secretly pleased. Girly Girl. She did not consciously jerry the results, but still, she finds herself asking for Collette's opinion. Although, perhaps she's not asking for an honest evaluation. Perhaps she desires to project a version of herself, not inquiring about how she is seen, but rather creating the image. Collette tries to feel her out. She asks, "What were the other choices?"

Adena says, “Artsy Girl, Fashionista Girl. Wouldn’t it just be Fashionista? Active Girl, Retro Girl—”

They break out in unison, “Ew—Retro Girl!”

“Mm,” Collete says. “You definitely have a little Fashionista in you.”

It’s an intended compliment, and Adena likes the word in black and white, but if Collette could only see the photograph of the representative model, the representative Fashionista (Girl), well-dressed yet not seductive, pretty yet not attractive. She looks again at the Girly Girl looking back at her, all shades of pink and blonde, at once full-bodied and diaphanous, the hair that is something unto itself, something not described or contained by that word. And then she thinks of Nico looking at her now, not at her actual self, but her as the model. Him looking at the modeled her.

On the other end Collette’s insistent: “Go ahead do me. Read me.”

Adena reads, *To get your crush’s attention, you’re most likely to choose clothes that: a) mix but don’t match, so he knows you’ve got a mind of your own b) look like you stepped off the runway—très chic! c) are soft and really feminine. You want him to be able to approach you d) go glam. If everyone’s looking at you, he will be too! e) are sporty, so you can keep up with him and his pals.*

Collette cries, “I can’t believe you chose *soft and really feminine*! And just who is it you want to be able to approach you?”

“But I am soft and feminine,” Adena protests. She hesitates about answering the question. She moves on, “OK. *You just earned big bucks from a long night of babysitting—* ”

"Babysitting? Don't think so. N/A. Next!"

One way or the other conversations must end, the run of words cease. Their conversation carries them to the broadcast of *O.C.,* after which Adena is there in her bedroom again, though it might as well be a different space entirely. The buzz has stilled, the heat has escaped, Collette's no longer in the room. Her magazine holds no more appeal. She tosses about on her bed, unable to sleep. She thinks of Nicodemus as she saw him that morning. Like a fire that feeds upon itself, the more she thinks of him, the more her desire grows. The more she burns.

She returns to her mirror, though the light now tells a different story. She has just turned fourteen, young for her grade. Her body was playing catch up with the rest of the girls in class, but still. Her chin's not as strong as she would prefer. Her eyes not as light, her brows not as dark. She regrets the time it takes to maintain her hair, silky as it sometimes can be, with curls at the ends as she likes. She frets about small folds of skin. Her nose has been done, though she wonders if the surgeon couldn't have shown a little more proficiency, made it a little more true to the woman, the nameless model in the magazine she brought in, who had the most perfect and retroussé nose. Outside her window, the fog has settled in the valley. He's out there, though she can't see for her reflection caught in the way.

With her books held to her like Collette, Adena wanders the halls looking for him. She scans the students lined against lockers, chatting inconsequentially.

She likes being in a crowd and she moves through it with a practiced grace, waiting to be picked out and confident she would.

The late bell rings and the halls empty. He's talking to a girl, Kelli Bloom?, outside the science lab, with the teacher inside already going through his opening routine. The girl goes red in the face. She might cry. Nico looks like he's waiting for a ride, bored and anxious, and when the girl finally goes into class he waits a moment before following. And in that moment he sees Adena, and she arches her eyebrows, puts on a collusive smile and keeps walking. He'll be trying to interpret that gesture all period long. At least.

Lauren, the girl who likes carrots, sits at another lunch table today, as Adena tells the others about the beet-faced girl outside the science lab. Kelli Bloom is indeed her name. Lindsey says she saw her over the summer and says, she said she and Nico were together, an item, confessed even going all the way with him at some party at her house. Heather fatuously wonders if what Adena saw meant they were through. While it annoys Adena that he would be so easy, so frivolous with his affections, it's clear the other girls have taken notice. Some claimed to have recognized his coming of age all last year. Some said they remembered him at this or that event, though he kept mostly with the boys doing the whole sport thing. For a moment, Adena feels bad for this Kelli Bloom. She will never stand a chance now. Of course, what she really needs to tell the table is, I saw him first. She crumples up her lunch and bag and says to Heather, "Oh, they're through."

Adena attempts to get his attention in the Social Studies class they have together. When Collette whispers to her during instruction, she laughs too loud so that he might hear. She has a pretty laugh, one that bubbles, a laugh that would carry to Nico and cause him to wonder at the source. And when the teacher pointedly stops his lecture and looks at her sternly, she is certain of his attention as well. *Sorry!* she mouths, playing with her hair, challenging with her eyes.

They're assigned group work this day, and fortune has it that she and he and a mousy girl named Cathy are put together. They get comfortable, move their desks together. Adena arches her back, draws off the loose pull-over to reveal her body in a too small T-shirt. Her navel is pierced with a gold ring. As Cathy straightens out the paperwork, Adena asks Nico about the basketball team, whether the coach is a nice man. He makes talk well enough, though it seems her words reach him from some great distance. Cathy interrupts, politely at first, and suggests they focus on the task, to which Adena mentions an upcoming party Collette's sister is putting together, a high school party. Cathy nods her head as though included in the conversation. Adena ignores her, so Cathy begins tapping her pen on the desk, and when Adena can stand it no more, she meets her imperious stare with a look that demands, Can I help you?! Cathy again suggests they direct their attention to the work. To which Adena shuts off her peripheral view of Cathy with one hand and rolls her eyes. Then she resumes her conversation and tone with Nico. Cathy shakes her head in disbelief and furiously begins the assignment on her own.

Nico wants out of the scene immensely. In fact, walking out the door seems increasingly reasonable. He suggests they help Cathy and can talk later. Adena makes him promise, and when he does, proceeds to do her best to impress him with her opinions about the work. She questions the point of the assignment and notes the remedial nature of it. She suggests the teacher is just trying to fill up the period, having them work in groups because she doesn't have anything else planned. "I mean look at us?" she offers as though proving her point. Nico suggests they just get it done, though in the end his own contribution is minimal. He's thinking of other things and is otherwise thoroughly stoned.

*

He had met Kelli Bloom in a finished basement because D'Marco wanted to get with a friend of hers. From the outset it was intended to be a small affair to put an end of the summer. The boys had got high in the woods, and the girls were already there listening to music, drinking Grasshopper schnapps in plastic cups. The basement had been converted into a game room with a bar and poker table, a game room for adults, and there was an isolated feel to it, as though the rest of the world was without consequence. While the others settled into a hand of cards, Nico sat on the floor with his back to the couch. D'Marco was talking this girl up, but he had smoked too much. He kept scratching at his head, and his words weren't coming out straight. Yet there was something Nico admired, and if not admired, understood that this girl didn't. She missed what was smart and laughed at what was dumb. Like when D'Marco felt what Nico felt and said to her, "Did you notice they aren't any windows in here?" He wondered, "When have you ever

been in a room without windows?" And Nico thought, exactly. That was it, the sense of isolation, and it was obvious and profound, and this girl just said, "Huh."

All the while, Kelli Bloom kept trying to get his attention. She invited him to join the game, and when he shook his head decided to keep him company on the floor. She wore too much makeup and her mother's jewelry and was the only girl in a dress. D'Marco kept scratching at his head and Nico wanted to tell him to knock it off, it was unattractive. When Kelli persisted in talking to him, he asked again what her name was. He tried to be nice and they drank, and he tried to keep an eye on how D'Marco was doing, and she talked until she finally asked if he wanted to see her bedroom. This was her parents' house. They told the others they were going to talk a walk, who all smiled knowing they were going out to smoke. They made out on her bed. They left the light on. In school many considered her attractive. Yet her hair was coarse, her face was too round. Nico closed his eyes when he kissed her. He suddenly remembered her name and whispered it to her so that this time he might not forget. They fumbled with buttons and she rolled onto her back. When they did it, she remained very still, like an animal listening for something in the distance.

They dressed. When they went back downstairs, the others seemed annoyed, slighted by their absence, and speculated why they had been gone for such a time. Kelli played off the comments and looked at Nico as though he and she were now above explaining, were in possession of some new wisdom that couldn't be expressed or understood. For the remainder of the night she spoke to

him with an intimacy stitched to her words. A possessiveness. She held onto his elbow. She asked him to get her a beer though none remained and she was already drunk. D'Marco looked sullen, things hadn't gone well for him, and Kelli made a fuss when he spoke of heading out. It was late, he said. The other boys got up and the girls remained seated and they all looked at Nico. Kelli looked at Nico and said he should stay. "It's late," Nico said. "I'll call you." And then the boys were leaving, and Nico was leaving, and Kelli was confused and concerned: "But you don't have my number?" The boys stopped leaving. Nico could not manage the scene in which she would fumble about and ask if anyone had a pen, a scrap of paper, with everyone waiting, watching, standing witness to it all. So he waved her off, ushered the boys out, said something about getting it from the phone book, and got up the stairs before she could make further protest. Outside, the boys naturally asked. Nico wouldn't say. Kelli would call the next day to let him know her number was unlisted.

The streetlamps crackle to life and mix with the reddened sunlight. Most parents are home at this hour, having abandoned the outside world for tomorrow. Nico keeps his back to the net and in small arcs to his left, back to his right, walks the ball closer. D'Marco keeps one hand square between his shoulders while the other pursues the dribble. A sweat has broken through Nico's T-shirt and the perspiration carries the heat of the other boy's palm. When Nico turns and brings the ball up, D'Marco rises to meet his extended body. Nico's a head above the

other boy, his eyes never off the net, and the moment the ball leaves his fingertips is electric.

They sit on the curb, their heads hanging low between their knees. D'Marco wants to hear about Kelli, wants a story about boys and girls and bedroom encounters, though he simply asks Nico what he's thinking about. And what Nico's thinking about is that he didn't think she would take off all her clothes on that late summer night. Throughout the day, at odd moments, he keeps catching the shocking images of her naked, fully naked. The extent of flesh. Girls show off skin all the time, at the shore they're ninety-five percent skin and hair, but he wasn't prepared for how the sexual parts transformed them. How they made them something other than what he thought of when he thought of girls. And somehow something baser. He was frightened. Without clothes, the body lost its proportions. Clothes did not dissimulate the body but constructed the body as a known and aesthetic form. Even in the magazine D'Marco showed him, the women were not truly naked. Bras were pulled down, or skirts were pulled up, yet they were still dressed bodies, perfectly posed to maintain the body as its dressed reality. The body as uninterrupted flesh appalled him. And stupidly, he never realized how different boys were from girls. He thought the differences were simply concealed at the chest and between the legs. But it was all around. Kelli's backside, how more ponderous than that of a boy. Nor did her waist taper as keenly. Her hips a parentheses, holding in an implausible digression of skin. Concealed by the dress she wore, she had comparatively fat thighs. He can't

explain this to D'Marco. She isn't like him. None of them are like him. He asks D'Marco, "Do you think she's pretty?"

After A.M. basketball practice, Nico steps into the locker room shower. He turns the water on with his back square to the other boys changing for class. They laugh nervously at what Nico's doing, as they exchange first their shorts and then their shirts, so that they're never fully undressed. They put on deodorant, comb their hair with water at the bathroom sink. They go to class with faces red and swollen, still sweating through their school clothes, all to avoid getting in the shower. The girls can always smell them out, and the coach swears at them, calls them all faggots regardless. But still, some of them will insist it's a little queer to take a public shower even as adults. Nico slowly scrubs himself down as the others whisper nervously at their lockers.

In Social Studies class, while the students are supposed to be doing seat work, Collette and Adena use the quiet time to pass notes. Adena writes to Collette that the teacher must have put off grading their previous assignment, and Collette writes either that or maybe she's writing a desperate love letter to the science teacher. Below this, Adena draws a picture of the science teacher with labels pointing out his physical shortcomings and returns it to Collette, who makes a similar minded cartoon of the social studies teacher. Adena gives the science teacher a speech bubble with a request for her to show him, his desire to see a more personal geography, a more intimate topographical map. Collette has their present teacher voice a reply about him experimenting on her anytime.

Adena writes this is as far as she cares to see things go, so Collette directs her to write Nico about Saturday's party, which Adena does. She has a pretty stationary that she scents with her perfume under her desk. She folds it into a neat little square. She goes up to the front, ostensibly to ask the teacher a question about the work, though along the way, coyly drops the note on Nico's desk. He looks up at her just to see her smooth the back of her skirt. Enclosed is a hand drawn map picturing Arcadia, the old train line and an X marks the spot in the woods. She's written that he still owes her a talk and it would be a shame to miss such an opportunity. Unless of course he's already going with someone else, which Adena knows he isn't. She returns down the aisle, does not make eye contact but runs her nails across his desk in passing. How nice he smells, she thinks.

The clouds stream to the sunset and will fall into the valley tonight. Already the sky is divided, cut between blue and red, with the moon ascendant. Adena pins her hair, adjusts herself within the halter top, and meets Heather at the door. Her sister waits out in the car, willing to give them a ride out to the old rail line.

When they come to the graveled cut through the woods where at one time a train passed through the valley, the sister gives them instructions to be at that precise spot come midnight or they'll be walking home. The girls' laughter hangs in the air, as they skip over the broken stones to a silver ribbon tied about the waist of a tree marking the way. They climb up the valley hand in hand. And as they near the gathering, the wind carries music to them in pieces, measures of a refrain that come and run away as an echo.

They enter the break as grandly as they would a ballroom, and Adena drops Heather's hand from hers. The dancing in front of the fire is mature in its movements, the postures showing a sense of purpose, and the light reveals in flashes open shirts, bare midriffs, ornaments of silver and gold. Those seated about the fire, knotted in couples or small sets, all seem to be talking at once. She finds Nico, sitting on a fallen tree, with a rosiness touched to his lips, a new-to-the-light smoothness still about the cheek. Collette sits next to him. And she's so bent over herself that Nico can't help but look at her as she talks. That Adena would be jealous of her, even for a moment, excites her even more. She casts her shadow over them, abruptly introduces herself to their conversation, sitting down on the other side of Nico. She presses her knees into his and tells him to tell Collette about the other day in Social Studies class (which she already told her about in detail) and when he demurs, she goes ahead and recounts the story herself, with that girl that was such a prude, and how sweet Nico had been, how diplomatic, how without him, what would they have learned?

Collette asks the basketball questions, and Adena asks the summer questions, though they're talking more to one another, commenting on one another's questions, inserting anecdotes, providing one another addenda for follow-up questions. Nico does not ask questions. Without texture, without color, the silhouettes dancing by the fire almost look perfect. Just dark shapes moving, holding beer bottles, black forms with sparks of green as the glass catches the light just right. D'Marco, there at the edge of the fire, stands looking back at the three of them in wonder, a look of awe at his good fortune. Nico's caught in the

middle, with Adena and Colette saying words to either side. Their words are almost beautiful. Just the singing of birds or the running of water. Just sounds moving. When he notices the girls have stopped and are clearly looking to him for a response, he says, “Say something else.” They laugh at his oddness. And then continue talking. He begins to get the same feeling he had in class the day before, to just walk. Their knees press into his, hold him in place. He tells Adena they need to excuse him, he needs to relieve himself.

He didn’t intend it to be an invitation. But Adena heard something in his voice that beckoned her to follow. She checks with Collette, is she reading this right? And when her friend excitedly approves, she lets off in the direction Nico has taken up the valley. She quickens her pace to try and come upon him, perhaps surprise him. Perhaps she won’t say anything and just watch. But he is not where she thought he would be. The music from the campfire sounds softly and in pieces. She calls out for him, and suddenly becomes chilled when from a distance a voice returns her call. She slows down, and the brush under her feet breaks like distant thunder. This is a boy’s game. Out there he’s laughing at her. But it isn’t funny, she calls out. The night has come full on, a mist has settled in the trees and shines their bark. She calls, “Nico, where are you?”

Adena is lost. She cannot go back to the fire, cannot show her face now. She hears the talk at school already. How foolish she has been. But it isn’t fair. She’s pretty, she is, and that’s supposed to count for something. This isn’t how it’s supposed to be. In the woods, she falls, and thrashes about in the leaves, and

her hair comes unpinned, and she cries, “Where are you?” Her voice sounds hollow and not her own. Still, she calls out, “Where are you?”

Nico’s familiar with this part of the valley, and uses the cant and setting moon to guide him home. He puts his phone on vibrate under his pillow, and as he hopes, D’Marco isn’t long in calling. They meet in the cul-de-sac where they play basketball. The clouds have come down, it’s after midnight, and D’Marco greets him, clasps his hand and asks, how was it, he got with her, right? Nico holds onto D’Marco’s hand, and it feels warm and uncared for. Something has happened, D’Marco realizes. “When you guys didn’t come back, I just figured.”

Nico suggests they play a game. One game.

He’s kidding, or stoned, or both. He has to know they would be heard and found out.

“One game. I’ll spot you five,” he says. This is what he needs. This is what he understands of his desire. The heat of their play and D’Marco, who mirrored his movements on the court. A simple game.

“It isn’t a good idea,” D’Marco says.

“I’m a little messed up,” Nico admits. Through the fog, porch lights glow like beacons or friars’ lanterns. He says, “I don’t think she’s that pretty.”

“No one’s perfect,” D’Marco acknowledges.

“No.” Nico reaches over and touches his chest, and holds it there, awkwardly, as though taking a temperature. Yet D’Marco’s body feels like his own, the ribs and flesh strong.

D’Marco says unsurely, “You should go out with her.” He gets up to leave. He says, “I would.”

Nico closes the door to his bedroom. In the mirror above his dresser, he looks at his reflection looking back at him, all shades of red and white, at once solid and fragile.

And then he imagines D’Marco looking at him, at the mirrored image of him. He puts his hands up to the glass and they are joined, palm to open palm. He says something without sound and in the mirror the mouth moves in reply.

THE ECONOMIST

Thomas Song had lost track of time. During the day, he would go into Old City, haunt it like a spirit. He would seek out the city's murals, expansive images cast onto the brickwork of tenements and old office buildings. Images faded by seasons and pollution, showing a people at work, in school, at play. He always returned to Stoddard Fleicher on his way home, and today he had lingered too long. The mural there depicted the fashions of history, a mannequin in Elizabethan dress, Victorian nobility, the bright costumes of urban youth at the turn of the last century. The murals were what was left, what connected this world to that of Song's childhood, when his parents would take him out to Spring Garden to watch the street puppets, glorious streaming things of the imagination. Qilin and caricatured princes held aloft and manipulated with lengths of pole. They burned China Town in 2019. He was an economist, and the economy had failed.

A wind had picked up, and Thomas Song found Second Street suddenly thinned of color. December, and already the temperature below fifty. He lived in Northern Liberties, and was nearly home when they came upon him, four of them, lean and angular, their clothes tapering like shadows in the wind. Behind them, the sun lit upon piercings and metal ornaments, kept their faces dark. They crossed the street lined with abandoned cars, calling out, "Ey, Chino. Hold up, Yaun." They fell in step ten yards behind him. There was still light to the day and Song thought if he could just get home before nightfall, he would be safe.

Which was when one of them jogged up behind him. Causally, he closed the distance and hit him in the side of the head with a brick. Song turned to face him at the last second, prepared to say, “Can I help you?” or perhaps with more force, “What do you want?” But strangely, there was no sound. He felt the brick and then fell, smoothly and heavily. Silently. He blinked and looked up at the man, the boy, standing over him. He still had the brick in his hand. Song couldn’t take his eyes from it, felt relieved upon seeing it unmarred with blood.

The others fell upon him. They rolled him onto his stomach and pulled off his jacket. Their hands went into his pockets, felt about his neck and wrists. One of them said into his ear, “Be smart here, Yaun. You an A student, right?” Which was when Song started to struggle. He turned, started to get up, before he got hit again. The face, the one who hit him, was soft with youth and pierced through the cheeks with safety pins. The hair was cut close, but there was something in the eyes or lips. It was a girl. She hit him with a closed fist.

Song relaxed then, and they finished with him. He had nothing besides the jacket. No one had anything. He listened to them move off, the brick carelessly thrown, cracking a car windshield. One of the them said with disappointment, “Chino trash.”

The wind moved through the street hollow. When he was a boy, his father had taken him to Fairmount Park, set up on a hill overlooking the city. Forty years ago, 2006. A day cast in primary colors with the skyscrapers reflecting the blue above and the grass vibrant after a rain. They built a kite together out by the old

Civil War Memorial with the bronzed monuments of generals on warhorses. A box kite they let loose and soar in the wind.

The world ended like Thomas Song had predicted. There was no nuclear winter, no killer virus, no rogue artificial intelligence. It was all very mundane, what the economists and socio-biologists knew all along. A global recession, then a depression, increased unemployment, overpopulation, a polarization of wealth, social inequalities. And in Song's mind, it began with the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. Soon thereafter, New China, with their ascension into the WTO emerged as America's principal rival. But at the time, what Song remembered, was National Stadium. All of China Town was in a state of holiday with the new promise of their homeland. The neighborhood talked of how the Olympics had transformed Korea twenty years prior. They took over Love Park where the city had erected a screen on which to show the opening ceremonies and there, hoisted upon his father's shoulders, Song saw the Nest. The superstructure of National Stadium was left exposed, a scaffold of unwrapped steel intended to emulate the work of a bird. Song remembered how a thousand shafts of light shot through the façade, how it made the stands and the stadium grounds glow. The doves, when released, took rise through that streaming sunlight and emerged from the stadium in a holy spectacle. They took flight on the wind.

The showdown in the Mideast soon followed, as Chinese and American interests clashed over the oil markets, both rushing to the end of it all. Under President Zemin, China continued to invest in American companies and buy US

debt in the form of treasury bonds. In the ensuing years, many of Song's peers feared the collapse would come with the Chinese aggressively selling them in order to devalue the dollar and create an inflation scare. But like Getty said, if you owe the bank a thousand dollars, you have a problem. If you owe the bank a hundred trillion dollars, the bank has a problem. The two economies became inextricable, China fostering the American deficit so that in turn they could continue buying Chinese goods.

Both economies were flawed and each in their own way unsustainable. At the turn of the century, China was riding a wave of cheap labor, its principal asset a surplus of young workers. Yet the labor was unskilled, the Made in China tag a misnomer. What the Chinese did was finish things. The technical components of photocopiers and game consuls, the processors and microchips, were built in Taiwan and Japan. These were then shipped to China which put them in pieces of bright plastic. China's problem didn't come till the Twenties, when that generation could no longer work and the social programs needed to support them became financially unviable.

The Americans, they continued to move away from the manufacturing sector towards what Song called one-way economies. Defense, the service industry, information. Economies with nothing to sell, without capital or capital reinvestment, economies that produced no goods. A financial entropy, yet the US continued to borrow and spend at an accelerating rate. The banks and corporations existed and grew rich on middle class debt, an equation never intended to be balanced, but like Getty said, if you owe the bank a thousand dollars. As the value

fell, panic set in and speculators began selling dollars, quickening the fall. In the end, the American economy became a paper tiger. When the dollar had sufficiently devalued and inflation sufficiently risen, in the end, people realized you couldn't eat information. And while he saw it all happening, while he studiously marked the economy's devolution and wrote his articles and taught his classes, in the end Song was unable to stop it. And, of course, the oil ran out.

"I'm sorry," the girl said. "I didn't know it was you." The girl who had hit him. The wind had died down and Second Street was now dark. Country dark. The grid was off again. She held him in the eye of a flashlight, where he had collapsed on the sidewalk. He righted himself and said, "I don't have anything."

She crouched down beside him. She shined the light on her own face, those terrible piercings, and said, "You don't remember me."

He shook his head. "I didn't have anything."

"424 Arch," she said.

This girl lived on his street, when the economy was still flush, when Lee, his wife, was still alive. He took a taxi to his office every morning and he'd see her in the window, perhaps reluctant to go to school. She watched him, and he imagined her mother calling her to get ready, to get her lunch, to hurry or she'd miss the bus. She would wave to him as he met his taxi. A shy wave, as though instructed to be polite. He said, "I knew you. When you were a girl."

She waved a sad hello. She said her name was Ia. "We need to go," she said. "The ghosts are out."

"Where?" he asked.

"You're still up the way, aren't you?" Ia snapped off the flashlight and felt for Song's hand in the dark.

Song unlocked the series of deadbolts, said, "By the door there. The candles there." Ia stepped into the loft and shined her light through the open space. She traced the paths of aluminum air ducts overhead, played the beam over the worn furniture. On the far wall, the old factory windows were a crossword puzzle of glass panes and plywood. "Quite the mouse hole you have here, huh?"

"It used to be a home." Song handed her a candle, lit one for himself. He shouldn't have let her come here, should have told her to go back to wherever she came from. She was just a girl. Song moved into the living area and set himself into his armchair. "Excuse me," he said to her. "But I need to sit down."

Ia moved through the darkness in a halo of orange candlelight, touching his things with unconcern. The dresser and the piece of lace atop it. The framed photograph of him and Lee at the monastery when they were in Tibet. "You should dust these," Ia said to him.

They used to have a woman, Gabriella, who would come on Mondays and Fridays. Lee would buy orchids that Gabriella would arrange in colored vases.

Ia said, "Why didn't you get out? You know, when you heard the horsemen coming?"

Lee wore the cheongsam he had bought her for the trip. The one with the embroidery about the sleeves she so admired. Out on the terrace, and the Khamje

valley was carpeted in wildflower. Her hair unpinned in the wind. And the clouds like heaven over it all.

Ia moved into the kitchen, opened cupboards, and peered into the dead refrigerator. “You have any alcohol?” she called.

Song closed his eyes and repeated, “I don’t have anything.” She went into the bathroom and he listened to her go through the medicine cabinet. Coming out, she shook a bottle of isopropyl alcohol as though to say, what’s this? She dampened a dish rag with it and said, “This going to hurt.” She knelt down at his side, set her candle next to his. She dabbed the cloth to his head, to the cut that in his younger years would have been covered in hair. She smiled and said, “This place is kind of a shit hole, you know?”

As she cleaned the blood from the wound, he smelled her for the first time, squalid, like the city. Yet there was warmth in her touch, the closeness of her body, the simple human contact. She touched his lip that had been split and said, “Sorry about that.”

Song reached out and put his hand on her elbow. He only meant to return her gesture, but she recoiled, threw the rag onto the couch. And then she pulled her t-shirt over her head. He held her eyes for as long as he could, and then looked down at her chest, where her breasts had been, at the two diagonal scars that didn’t quite touch to form a V. She stood there, body cocked at the waist, challenging and suddenly, quietly, angry. She said as matter of fact, “I ain’t no cunt for you.”

His face reddened. “That’s not what I— I didn’t ask you to come here.”

"Well, I'm here."

He told her, "Put your shirt on."

She did, never looked away. She went into the sleeping area of the loft and lay down on his bed.

Song demanded, "What do you want?"

"I need to stay here tonight," she said. She pulled the worn covers over her, turned her back to him. She said, "We all lost someone, you know?"

Song awoke, cramped and shivering from sleeping on the couch. He got up, went over to the bed and checked on the girl. Through the window, the spread of morning light had not yet made its way to her. Her head was pressed into the pillow, she clutched it with desperation. She was in the same position as when she had first lain down, as though she had simply turned her body off. The scars on her chest were old. The lines were sharp. Something sharp had been used, something surgical. He thought of how the skin had tried to heal itself, tried to remember an old genetic program of how it was supposed to go. The scar tissue had turned in on itself at the wound. Buckled.

Song went into the kitchen and checked if the water had been turned on yet. From under the sink, at the bottom of the trashcan he retrieved a slim computer. He sat at the table and turned it on. He looked down the length of the loft. She was still asleep. Over the years, all his work had been done on this machine, all his theories pressed into its keys. It was the only thing he had left, the one thing he wouldn't part with, not for food, not for his own safety.

The internet access point was up. He opened the *Times* news page, and a banner across the top indicated moderate pollution levels due to the recent winter winds. He scanned the morning headlines. Last of Big Three Closes Doors. Surgeon General Warns of Dysentery Outbreak. MTA to Operate on Limited Schedule, Closes Lines. President Speaks as Unemployment Hits 42%. Song opened this last article, read the President's latest words. "We need to see ourselves, this great country, as but in a period of transition. A period of evolution. And what we need now is hope. And we need to begin to see the future as a light ahead of these dark times, for we cannot make happen what we cannot see possible." Hope, Song wondered.

He turned from the screen and saw the girl staring at him with curiosity from the bed. "Good morning," he said and quickly made to shut down the computer.

"Yeah." Ia got up, went into the bathroom. She flicked the light switch on and off. "E's on," she called.

"Yes."

"Water?"

Song shook his head to himself, listened for the turn of the spigot, the dry hiss of air.

"I'm gonna use the toilet. Yeah?" she called.

"Yes," he said and quickly returned the computer to its place under the sink.

Ia came out and informed him, “I didn’t flush.” She said, “You have a computer, then?”

Song regarded her, the lines of resignation in her face as though just painted on.

“I’m not going to rob you,” she said. “That wasn’t my idea, you know. Yesterday.”

Song nodded.

She asked then, “What you reading?”

“Our president says all we need is hope.”

“Well I’m all dry on that. You tell the president I can’t help him.”

“You must be hungry,” Song said. He rummaged in the cabinets, the refrigerator he used as a pantry for packaged and dried foods, potatoes, a box of orange substrate. Upon seeing how little there was, his offer embarrassed him. And suddenly he had an appetite. For the first time in a long time, he wanted to eat. A big American breakfast like his mother used to do, with meat and sugar. The truth was, he didn’t want her to go. He knew having her here was foolish, that in the end she would do him wrong. She would take what she wanted and leave. He said to her, “We’ll go to the store. And when we come back, maybe the water will be on.”

Ia wasn’t listening. She was in the living area, had found a cardboard shipping box of manila file folders. She had one of the folders open and was reading an article it contained. She said, “‘Buy Now, Save Later: Intertemporal

Consumption or, The Trouble with Homo Economicus.' 'Behavioral Finance?' 'Heterodox Economics?'" She looked over at Song. "What is all this?"

"Nothing," he said as he moved across the loft.

"You wrote this?"

"That was my job. Before. I thought I could save the world." He took the article and folder out of her hands and returned it to the box. "Listen," he said. "These things, they don't matter. I've been meaning to get rid of them. What matters is that we eat."

"I should go," she said.

"We'll go and get something to eat, and then we'll talk."

She nodded. She said, "Maybe I'll help you red up this place a bit."

The day was warm and the trash hadn't been picked up for several weeks now. As Song and Ia passed, tiny butterflies rose up in clouds of soft white from the plastic bags piled and torn apart on the side walk. The air carried the sweetness that tinged decomposition. One of the butterflies followed Ia, and when she held out her hand it alighted on a finger. "Butterflies?" she wondered. "Where did they all come from?"

"They're not butterflies," he said. "They're moths. They're feeding on the garbage."

Her face became hard again. "They're still beautiful."

"Yes," Song agreed.

The government store was at Fifth and Spring Garden. The metal blinds of the storefront remained down, laced with graffiti. Song opened the door for her and she hesitated, as though having second thoughts about going in.

They passed through a metal detector, and the security guard, a large black man, eyed them from top to bottom, bottom to top. Song smiled and said hello, to which the guard turned his head and looked away.

Inside, the light was yellow and dim, flickering intermittently. Ia went off on her own, and Song wandered the aisles once filled with brightly colored boxes, cereal in fifty varieties, kiwi and papaya fruit, flown in from distant countries and stocked that morning. Food production was now heavily subsidized, and the government had taken over its distribution. The shelves now contained vast spaces between products that mostly bore the generic, black and white USDA label.

The cashier didn't look up at Song, not once, as she scanned and bagged the few items from his basket. She muttered under her breath, and Song politely asked if there was a problem. She shook her head, sucked air between her teeth. She was almost done. She finally looked at him and said, "How you gonna pay?"

Song held out his ration card and waited for her to accept it.

The woman shook her head again, the gesture laden with blame. She took and scanned the card.

Ia came back just in time, and Song asked her if she had found anything, if there was anything she wanted to get.

"No," she said. "I'm good." Her face was bright red. Something was wrong. Which was when he noticed a man in a suit coming towards them from the manager's office. Halfway there, he called out to the security guard, "Bill," and pointed to Song and Ia. The few customers all turned to look. The guard slowly closed in on them from the other direction. Naively, Song thought it was because of him, because he was Chinese. He steadied himself. He would calmly explain that he was born here, that his card was good, that all he wanted was to buy something to eat. And then Ia was over the check-out counter and racing towards the exit.

Still not understanding, Song called out, "Wait, it's okay. Don't run!"

The guard readied himself to take hold of Ia at the door. She grabbed a can of soup that had just been scanned by a clerk and threw it at him. The guard put up his hands to protect himself, and Ia was by him and out the door.

Not until late in the afternoon did Song return home, the sun hidden behind a haze of pollution. Numb from the encounter at the government store, he couldn't believe the girl was there, set down on her haunches, leaning against the wall, waiting for him. She smiled at his approach. Song ignored her. He would walk right by her, directly into the building.

She said, "I was starting to give up on you."

Song turned on her and said, "Why would you do that?"

She regarded him, then reached into a pocket and offered him a protein bar. She nodded. "It's good."

Song slapped it out of her extended hand. He yelled at her, “I’ve been at the police station all day. Stealing. Food of all things, from a government agency. That’s a federal crime. You know this, don’t you?” He shook his head and said in Mandarin, “Look at you. You’re a thing.” His hands were shaking, trying to unlock the front door. It was all suddenly too much and he went inside, up the stairs to the loft.

The girl called after him, “It’s not my fault.”

Song set the bag of groceries down on the kitchen counter and listened to the girl follow him up the stairs. In the doorway she said, “Thomas, what am I supposed to do? Where’s my ration card?”

“What do you want from me? Why are you here?”

She made no reply.

“There are people out there that can help you.”

“There ain’t no one can help.”

“There has to be someone.”

She looked at him steadily. “What did they say. The police?”

“They wanted your name. Who you were.”

“What’d you say?”

Song busied himself in the kitchen, checking the stove, putting a skillet on. He said, “The truth I hope. I don’t know you.” He took out a knife and worked it on a potato. “Fortunately, you don’t look much like a daughter of mine.”

Ia sighed. “What are you doing?”

"What does it look like? I'm making breakfast at four o'clock in the afternoon." He took out another potato. "Close the door if you're staying."

As Song cooked, Ia returned to the box of files, went through them now with more care. The hash on the stove hissed and seemed to amplify the silence of the room. She asked quietly, "Why did it happen?"

"What? Why did what happen?" Song replied over his shoulder.

"This. I mean, everything."

"It's very complex." He didn't have the strength to explain, to go through it all again. Why it happened. "There are many reasons."

"Yeah," she said, still expecting an answer. She waited.

Song said, "I thought you were going to help clean up this shit hole."

"I will. After dinner, I promise. But tell me."

"Part of it had to do with the dependency ratio, in places like China and India mostly. Here, there was the bank crisis—"

"No. I mean *why*?"

The food in the pan browned. The smell of the meat was not as he remembered, did not have the savor he thought it would. "Human nature," he said. "An atavistic notion of survival, tribal hardwiring in the brain. Biological selfishness. Greed. We've always been heading to this, and I'm not sure anyone could have done anything about it. And we knew what was right. We knew what we should've done. For all our civilization, we haven't evolved very much."

Ia carefully put away the article she was looking at.

"Come," Song said. "Let's eat."

Song cleared the table and stacked the dishes at the sink. As he washed his hands, he asked, “What happened to you? The scars, I mean.” He came back to the table, sat across from her. “Why?”

He saw the anger build inside her. Her voice changed, took up the accent of the street, sharp and unforgiving. “It’s a new world,” she said. “Your world, it burned up with all your theories and money. Look at you, you’re a walking corpse. You haven’t pulled a live breath until today. Course, we’re all sucking dead.”

Song extended his hands into the middle of the table. “Tell me what happened.”

She shook her head as though with regret. “No one did anything I didn’t want. And no one ever will.”

“I don’t understand, you did this? To yourself?”

She pushed her chair back. “No good in being a girl. You people had it right.”

“What’s this?”

“Drown the babies. Spare us.”

“It’s mutilation,” he said, as though just realizing the definition of the word.

“It ends with us.”

Song folded his hands together and told her, “Lee had wanted a child. She used to say a flower can bloom from the withered tree. Stupid, I know.” The food had made Song tired. He said, “It’s been a long day.”

“You lie down then.”

He nodded, took a last hard look at her. He lay down, faced the reddening sun, and closed his eyes. He listened to her, the sounds of her. The clatter of dishes being washed and put away. The bathroom door closing with a careful click. The shower running. He felt the heat of the water, the steam. He listened to her come over to the bed, felt the mattress give way. She settled in front of him. And then she took his hand and wrapped it around her, led it under the t-shirt to rest against her razed chest. The scar tissue was surprisingly soft. Her flesh was still young, the heart underneath it. He held her.

When Song awoke he knew she was gone. He could feel it in the dark stillness of the loft, the old emptiness to it. Still, he called out her name. He got up, turned on the light, and when he did, he remembered her being in the kitchen. The cabinet doors opening. Below the sink, where the garbage can was. He knew then what she had done. Why else would she have come to him. Why should he have expected anything else from her. He had been a fool, always had been. His articles, with their numbers and graphs, trying to express human behavior. He went over to the box of files, and under the weak light reread the titles tabbed on the folders. He picked up the box and carried it out onto the street. He left it on the curb amongst the other trash and went back inside.

Song opened the cabinet door under the sink. The liner to the garbage can contained the waste of their meal. The potato peels and meat fat that should have been saved. He tied up the bag and lifted it out of the can. He brought the can into the light. And there at the bottom was his computer, just as he had left it.

Song took the machine over to the bed. He ran his hand over the smooth plastic. He set the computer aside. On the dresser, was the picture of Lee in the embroidered cheongsam. A wind had swept through the valley that day, with the urgency of having traveled from some great distance. Lee said it was the breath of P'an Ku, who chiseled the universe out of chaos. She said she never felt so alive. The wind had the power to go right into the soul. It did, she said, the wind moved through her. Song got up and examined the picture, more vivid than he remembered, now that the dust had been wiped away.

The next morning, Song left with the computer and began looking for her. Instead of the walks he took into Old City, where he would read the faded murals of their past, he began to wander the streets of Northern Liberties. And then further out to the Amtrack El, following the shadowy trusses that wound north to Olney and Temple, to the waterfront docks, laden with rusted hulks and the USS O'Kane, a destroyer, poised in the harbor. He walked past the abandoned gas stations and schoolyards, the 95 overpass that once shook with traffic, the black markets of Fish Town. Hope, Song thought, sprung out of fear, and it had been a long time since he had been afraid.

On the third day, a day in which the sun seemed fixed in the sky, he saw them, two boys sitting up in the second tier of a fire escape set back in an alley between Tenth and Eleventh. One of them was wearing his jacket. Their backs were to him, hunched together, intent on something they passed back and forth between them. He heard one of them say, “That the one. Check it.” Approaching them, Song took a chance and called out her name.

The boys shuffled up what they were holding before turning to face him. He called out Ia’s name again, more loudly this time.

They recognized him and regarded him defensively. One of the boys yelled down, warily, as though to express no hard feelings, “What you need?”

The other one said, “You don’t look too good, Sensai. Look like maybe you got bricked or something. Maybe you ought to get that checked out.”

Song called out for Ia.

One of the boys said, “Hey, she not here. You want to go home now, before something happens.”

The fire escape towered above Song, a lattice of cracked red paint and exposed steel. Ia came out through a broken window a story above the two boys. She looked down at them, then out, and saw him. “Thomas?”

He called up, “Come with me.”

“I don’t need your help,” she said.

The boys laughed. They jeered up at her, “Ey, Sister. You got a boyfriend? Tell me, what he going do with you?” They turned to Song, “What you going do with that, Chino?”

Song called, “Ia, come down.”

She hesitated.

“Just come with me. Please. There’s something I want to show you.”

The boys echoed, “There’s something he want to show you, Sister.”

“Hurry,” Song called.

Ia rushed down the flight of stairs to where the boys were. One of them made to stop her, but she knocked his hand away, and whatever he had been holding scattered into the air. They were cards of some sort that turned in the wind. “Hey!” the boys called out and watched the cards flutter to the ground. Ia turned her body over the fire escape railing, climbed down the trellis to its end and dropped to the alley.

Song went over and picked up one of the cards. The corners were bent, the gloss long worn away. Steven Jackson. League MVP, 2007. Football cards.

“What are you doing? Leave them,” Ia said. Song took his time. He bent down to pick up each card that had fallen. He ordered them into a neat stack and left them below the fire escape.

Ia said, “Thomas, what’s going on?”

He was ready. He had been ready since the first day when he left with his computer and came home with two gallons of gasoline. With Ia, he stopped at the loft to pick up some things, some food he had prepared and potable water, the old key to the Chrysler. A 2020. Song wrapped the canister of fuel up in a blanket, as Ia asked in wonder, “Where did you get that?”

"Let's go. We're losing our light." Song took her hand and led her back out onto the street.

The car was on Fourth. The driver's side window was broken in, rust spots dappled the body, and the back seat was strewn with trash. Song scanned the street. He told Ia to keep an eye out and began to clear the car. He checked the street one last time, then emptied the gas into the car's tank. "Get in," he said to Ia.

It had been years since Song had driven. The engine stammered then came to life. He stamped on the accelerator and the car fishtailed into the street.

He did not stop at the intersections. On the approach to the Vine Street Expressway, he told Ia to keep her head down. It was some time ago now, but there had been a rash of shootings at highway on-ramps.

"Thomas, where are we going?"

"A place," he said. "Have you ever been out of the city?"

He could see in her face, she was trying to remember. When she was a girl, Song expected. She didn't say.

They got onto 95, headed north and east and climbed out of the Delaware Valley. The highway was near deserted with every ten miles or so a car coming from the opposite direction. Throughout the ride, Song and Ia kept silent. She stared out the window at the passing landscape, darkening as they went.

When they neared the shoreline, Song remarked, "Lee and I used to come out here. In the spring." They climbed a soft hill, and when they crested it the

ocean was suddenly spread before them. Song slowed the car and pulled over to the breakdown lane.

"Why are we stopping?" Ia asked him.

Song pointed to the ridgeline north of them and opened the car door. He walked across the highway for a better view, and Ia quickly got out to follow him. The wind was strong coming off the water, made Song aware of his body, every part of him pushing back against it.

When Ia caught up to him, he said, "There's more than I remembered." There, running up the spine of the hill was a line of windmills. The sun reflected off the white steel, flared as the blades turned, a string of camera flashes down to the shore.

"Windmills?" Ia asked.

"Yes, turbines. I wanted you to see them. I thought it might matter. I thought it might help."

They had driven over fifty miles and Song knew there couldn't be much gas left in the car. He told Ia. "I'm sorry," he said. "Maybe it was selfish to bring you here. Maybe it was me who wanted to see them again."

They looked out to the windmills. "We'll find another way back," she said.

The blades turned smoothly, relentlessly, like the hand of a clock.

ACTUARIES

So there's this girl, and she's getting fixed to go out. I'm there, watching her watch me in the mirror. In the summer, freckles mottle her face, a mask she wears this time of the year. She says to her reflection, "Almost ready," though I don't mind waiting. I tell her such. She puts her hair back into a loose knot. She wears black regularly and scarlet when she wants to turn heads, though blue is her best color. It cools her complexion. In the poor yellow light, her closet seems strewn with eerie, tactile shadows, which are the black tops and bottoms of her various outfits. Clothes are elsewhere. Piled on the floor, on the bed. This is her, this is Cly. Her tongue and navel are pierced with simple ornaments. Her nose has been done and she has contemplated doing her breasts. "Nothing outrageous," she said, "something with tact." I lied and told her I was not attracted to women with tactful breasts. But here, she has a mouth that would be marred by lipstick. When Cly speaks you are aware that words are physical gestures. She turns and lights a cigarette. She says, "Ready."

This girl Cly, she killed herself some nine years ago. At times she is so present that I forget. Now, I'm in Philadelphia waiting for some other girl who I will never quite trust to join me for a ham and cheese sandwich that I'll pay ten dollars for because it's on fancy bread and called a *croque monsieur*. And I'm fine with this. This is one of those sidewalk cafés you'll find in the center of the city and regardless of the decorous awning and potted plants and other trappings fit to create the illusion of an interior space. I know that I am out on the sidewalk.

I wonder if the people walking by have noticed the broken arc of rainbow set in the sky like a parenthesis. I have quit the financial page of *The New Yorker* though it remains open on the table. The article is about insurance and says that unlike other forms of risk, catastrophe is unpredictable. This, after the Tsunami of 2004. But people don't take out policies for catastrophe. The writer states, "Give people complicated options involving serious consequences, and they often prefer not to make any decision at all." These things do not disturb me.

But this other girl, I'm not sure what she wants and when the time is right, I will tell her that I don't think things are going to work out between us. In the end I will say that it has nothing to do with her, that it is not her fault. I will say that sometimes people are born damaged and sometimes, in a life, people get damaged. Sometimes you get to meet them. Cly. It's been nine years, and people have stopped asking me whether I have thought about why she did it. I do not feel responsible.

The headline was "Local Grad Claims Own Life", and I thought it was an awfully proprietary verb to account for a death. But it was a small town fenced off from a large university, which is why the story got the press it did. The article ran three columns. It was a mixed-up piece of writing that didn't know what it was supposed to be, part eulogy and part investigative report. The writer—and I don't hold anything against him—had a mustache like Tom Selleck, which didn't conceal his young age. He wrote that she left behind a mother and father, though didn't mention they were divorced, and that she was aspiring to become an

actuary, which started out as a joke. Following our interview he decided not to mention me whatsoever. He also wrote that the police were looking into the Norco prescription, which was not Cly's though its contents ended up inside her all at once.

I met the writer at a bar and I got there too early. When he showed up I was ready to tell him too much. I told him that she wasn't fit for living. That she couldn't own a travel mug as it would get left in her car for the contents to rot. That in the refrigerator there would be milk cartons dated three weeks old, two weeks old, one week old. Each half empty. That she mixed wood stain in a blender, and poured Quickcrete down the garbage disposal to be rid of it. I told him to go right now to our house and he'd find a dime stuck in the impellers, and how her loose change ended up in the kitchen sink is beyond my imagination. She just didn't know what things were for.

The writer didn't want to hear this, I saw it in the way he tried to hide his mustache with his hand, so I let it go. After a time, he asked me if I had any recent photographs of her. The mother, he said, didn't have anything better than her high school graduation picture. I thought about showing him the scrapbook made from the nights when Cly took X-rated shots of us in various positions. Black and white artsy stuff, body compositions and the like. But no, I told him, I didn't. They ran the graduation picture, which looked like all graduation pictures I had ever seen. The subject stood straight and squared to the camera. The smile was flat, the features were flat: the depth of field was too great. I did not recognize her. This newsmen and her family, they made a cut-out of her and buried a paper doll.

I hit her once. It was a good Hollywood slap with solid contact that made that pretty mouth of hers redden even more. I had told her I was leaving and she became hysterical. She frightened me, so I hit her. And then a surprising thing happened. The shock of it sobered us both. We looked at one another with the silent panic that comes with the sudden remembrance of something you had forgotten to do. It was like that for a moment. And then she was in love with me, and I was in love with her. This was in her last year.

She had just graduated from the university. At the time, I was working in an Italian kitchen that featured wood-fired ovens. Cly waited tables there for three, four weeks, until she was fired. She forgot about tables and gave people she didn't know free drinks. That summer I was working the nine to five prep shift in the basement kitchen. I was mostly able to stay out of the sun other than the hour I spent in the alley, which turned a corner and ended at the wood shed. Here I would split logs for the ovens, which I didn't so much mind as there was a serenity brought by the rise and fall of the ax, some small release in the division of the wood.

We were renting a house in town, and I wondered what she would do when that summer expired and our lease was up. She was at the end of the seven-exam battery required for her actuary license, though there was no talk of employment. While her contemporaries were getting themselves together, getting married, and getting stable jobs, she was out looking for used furniture to reupholster. She had a knack for it. On Tuesday mornings, she would wend her

way to the bazaar where merchants were receiving new inventory, or without compunction carry off items from the curb at the end of the term when graduates discarded everything, taking home a scratched end table or a tarnished lamp. She had a collection of empty picture frames that haunted our dining room walls. She had a second collection of broken chairs with needlepoint seats or ornate spindles, which looked inviting though could not be sat upon. At the time, I could not wrap my mind around why one would need an end table or sideboard. Nor did I know what a sideboard was. In her own way, I suppose she was trying to make a home, perhaps with one eye on what I would do, wondering where I would fit into all this, this new *mise en scène.*

And I worried about her in my own way, which was to observe, make note, and do nothing. I didn't want to believe that she couldn't take care of herself. Each night, when I came home from the restaurant, it was a roll of the dice. She would be drinking the last glass in a bottle of wine. Before I was even in the door, she'd call out for me with the excitement and tenor of a child, run to me, already halfway through our first conversation. Run, as you would in a race. She would hang on me, telling me about how she had gone for a walk downtown and passed the pet store and saw in the window some species of giant bunny with particularly exaggerated feet and wouldn't it be the most wonderful thing if we got one, we could house train it, you can do that, with a litter box like a cat, and it would just hippity-hop around and be cute all day, like me—and I just needed to get to the kitchen to get to the refrigerator to get that first beer opened and down my throat.

Or a light would be on in the kitchen, where she sat at the table, turning a fork over in one hand, a cigarette dangling in the other. On the table, only the ashtray. I'd know that she had been sitting there, just like that, for some long time. She would try a smile, without looking at me. She looked dangerous with that fork in her hand.

Or she would be upstairs with three books open at once, her paperwork about her in smart piles, her hair tied back, and I'd have my beer in the kitchen, and we would each sit in separate rooms, one on top the other, until she came down and demurely asked, "Are we done yet?" She would sit in my lap and I would say, "We're done." And it was in those tired moments that I loved her most. The moments when we simply didn't have the strength not to love one another.

The worst thing I could do was to get us high. Because I was feeling good. Because I wanted to feel better. Nine years later I would have known just to go to bed. But that night when I hit her, we got stoned, and there was no television and we couldn't dance and I was so fine with that, just holding her, but she wanted to talk. She told me how the insurance companies were unlike casinos. They consider the odds of turning up a twelve on two dice to be one in thirty-six, while the insurance companies base risk on the previous one thousand rolls, twenty-nine of which happened to be a pair of sixes. She said neither cared about you though, as you stand at the table or live through your life, so long as you don't cheat.

She smoked a cigarette in the doorway that opened to the back porch. Inside and out, the air was heavy; the night had yet to cool. She asked, "What did

you bring for me tonight?" And I showed her what was in the refrigerator. I unwrapped the damp kitchen towel and revealed the pair of soft shell crabs that I carried home in my pockets from the restaurant. They were blue, and alive, and turned red when I sautéed them for her. I got her another beer.

While she ate, she told me about when she was a girl. Her father used to tell her she wasn't pretty and then let her do whatever her mother said she couldn't. She was lonely and listened to musicals too intently. She played a game and pretended she was Evita Peron, or some tragic heroine desperately in love, only she would shoot herself in the head and lie in the dining room and wait to be found. She said she passed entire afternoons like that. Sometimes it would be hours before her mother would come and yell to get herself up off the floor.

She finished eating and stared at me. Something in my face or silence had put her off. She demanded, "What's the matter?" and I told her this was different than had she asked the question with sincerity. It was only a matter of time before one of us said something dangerous. Invariably it would have to do with us. Us, like some political confederation. Cly, I suspected, got a rush out of this emotional danger. She said, "I'm worried about us." And I said that if she stopped worrying there would be no need to. She worried us the way you would worry an inflamed bit of flesh. I told her that worry was a term used in fox hunting. I told her it meant to seize by the throat with teeth, to throttle and mangle. She asked me what I meant. She was clearly agitated.

I opened a beer and she told me I was wasting my life. We had been in this scene before. Before I had said, to remind her, that there was no audience. That

there was no one to laugh or keep score. Just us and the words that could cause damage. I wanted to take her outside and show her the heat lightning and say that it could be like this, that it would all be fine if she just did the dishes and we went to bed. It could all be flashes with no sound. She lit a cigarette and said, “I can’t say anything to you.” She was all chin and cheekbone that night. She had lost weight. I told her such.

Then I told her we’re no good together and she threw her plate at me. It took a moment to realize what she had done. She was saying something, trying to be an actor. She had been working on her delivery. This was when I hit her. It was a good cinematic slap, something you would see in a black and white picture where the man and the woman are really in love. She would kill herself in October and the writer would write his article.

“What’s there to lose?” she had asked, when she suggested we move in together. That was when our knowing one another was new, and when Cly first told me about risk. She met me at the restaurant, in the alley behind it where I split wood. She came around the corner like a slip of shadow. She was wearing heels that dug into the splinters and dust. We couldn’t look beyond one another but for the brightness of the day. She told me she had been to see her advisor at the university. As a preface she lit a cigarette and then said, “So I’ve declared.” She told it like a joke. She said she sat down with this guy she hadn’t seen since her first semester, wondering whether it was even the same guy, and he asked her what she’s good at, and she told him math, and he pulled out a file that was titled

"Good at Math" and began reading down a list that went, "Accountant… Actuary… Architect…"

Sometimes the freckles made her face hard to read. I could get lost in them. I said, "And that's that, then?" and she told me it was all about risk management.

Risk. I always imagined the tragic side of it. Until I met her, risk meant ship wrecks and market crashes. It was a nasty word, a word with fangs that you should not trust, defined in terms of the possibility for loss. She wanted to manage the consequences of this. For Cly, risk was simply the mathematical graph of how things were supposed to end. It was lifeless, like the skin of a child's doll. She never considered herself in the equation.

But I couldn't look up from her shoes for the brightness of the sun. I set the splitter aside and we smoked casually. She asked me then how you knew if you were happy, and I told her that you were willing to live your life over again. Not in the sense of "if I had the chance to do it all over," but again like watching a rerun, where you knew how it would all turn out but wanted to see it one more time anyway. This alley we were in was a space like that between the letters of a word typed on a page. We were hidden in this space. We had just met, and I wanted to keep us there forever. And she playfully said that she wasn't sure if she could sit through it the first time around.

Later, we drank Chianti at her place and played Scrabble, and she enchanted me with her words that were letters. She laid down ZEE, and I questioned her, "Zee?" and she said, "The twenty-sixth letter of the alphabet." I

did not challenge. We sat cross-legged and close, without a thought for the furniture, and talked about getting a place together for the fall. Her hands wondered at the burns from spattering cooking oil that dappled my forearms. She asked, “Doesn’t it hurt?” and I answered her truthfully, “No. It doesn’t hurt.” I played out all of my letters and the game was finished. We opened another bottle of wine. Then, I asked her if she was all right, really. When she looked at me she looked scared. She said she was happy, she could live this moment again.

But. So I’m with this girl at a sidewalk café in Philadelphia and the ham and cheese has surpassed my expectations. She has had the *niçoise* salad and said it was fine, just fine. I make eye contact with the people who pass by our table, but not with this girl. She asks me what’s the matter, and I need to tell her that some people are ill-equipped for life, for living, for the day to day continuity of being alive. Like being born with a fluttering heart or a kidney predisposed to quit before its time. Sometimes these things just fail. The mind can be like that. Built to interpret and interrogate, the mind will turn on itself if you don’t keep it busy. It will question itself and demand meaning of itself. You need to have ready answers. Cly lay in wait for three hours before I found her body. But I don’t think this girl will understand. I sign the bill. I tell her that I don’t think things are going to work out between us. I say it’s not her fault and it has nothing to do with her. I show her the curve of rainbow caught between clouds and say sometimes it’s like that. Sometimes the arcs we are inclined to follow to their end are broken pieces. Sometimes they do not cross the sky. I ask her, “Ready?”

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